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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

AFTERPIECE: A NOVEL

by

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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled Afterpiece: A Novel submitted by Michael Dibdin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

ABSTRACT

In an unspecified town, at an indefinite time, two people, a young man and a girl, meet and fall in love. This novel records the young man's view of the development and end of their affair, and the effects it had on his life. In the course of his recollections he is forced to consider the nature of time, of writing and of memory, not abstractly but as they affect his life.

The title of the novel is drawn from Eighteenth-Century dramatic jargon: an afterpiece was a short, usually farcial, entertainment played after the main production.

Since I left you my life has been sick through and through. Then I thought it only an incident in the sequence I called myself, a moment in becoming the person for whom it would be no more than a moment, justified as one to the next in going. A cat crushed under moving wheels becomes part of the road, but in a close room it dies for ever, everywhere. I left you two bleak years ago and am leaving you still, more of me now than you ever were then. The smell of decay is stronger than sweat and harder to hide.

For this is not you, my love. The sweet stink in my life is nothing of you then or ever. Memory parodies, not preserves the past, for as lived it was not past but present. It was that present that was whole and real and these memories a mockery of it.

I have done everything I could. Stopped writing to you, that running sore, moved to another town, taken in another girl to tickle my balls. And all a dream flight with no steps taken. The soft belches come up, nothing impolite of course, no improper hysteria, up from all this undigested, indigestible cud I have made of our life together. This is desperation, since I know no other way, a finger down the throat to fetch it all up. To create once and for

all both that present and this, to renew that feeling of being in time, of being moved, being happened, to make that present this and from there step not into my past, but into the future which has eluded me for so long. Perhaps it is impossible, lying so deep, carried everywhere the blood goes, but to clear out the dead summer haze that has settled on our, our, past and shows us as sad doomed figures in a sepia print, to clear away all this sweet sentimental filth and at last, now, do you justice, you, girl that I loved, I think you see and are on my side.

Today the sea is heavy and level as sodden cloth. It moves slowly, folding and refolding. Thin snowflakes drift against the glass and move into the rounded shape of water. Sometimes I think it is only the town to blame, if I could understand that the rest would clear, a simple tale of love with a beginning, a middle and an end. Certainly the town qualified everything, this town where you picked me up and I laid you down and then mislaid you, where I spent a year in misery and left only to return, to lose myself again in these crippled streets in the hope of meeting myself coming the other way, two years younger and wiser.

It is a town without a roof, where half the streets lead only to the sea, where the winter sun empties the air, where I, coming from a dull damp land where we have always the cloud over our heads, was left out in the open. Where half the town is water there is no rest. The slow hills I knew held any bundle of preoccupations gently, you could count on them. But the sea is another, it thrusts its moods upon you and in the vastness of that horizon, just beyond the window, everything I had assumed thinned and spread and vanished. I had to start again, crippled by the scars where assumptions were torn away, exposed under the clinical sun

to the restless presence of the sea, to learn how to get by.

If there is a beginning it is here, where I hope the end will be like it, clean. For these cut glass streets that so ribboned my flesh at first breed no germs, the facets of our life they refract are pure as the light and the only pain they cause is simple loss. The rot is elsewhere, this much clear.

I was going to say the streets are full of you, but they are not, nor of anything. But you constantly surprise me, some flake of you that has waited for months, ever since the day you shed it in passing, for the precise combination of favours, to flame up before my eyes. Only this afternoon you suddenly sat reading in a big armchair, book open on your knees, bent over it, and with one huge bite demolished half an apple. Only I could not see you properly, could not go over and palm the grain of your brown hair, have you look up surprised as always and taste the juice on your lips. Only rub my stupid eyes and stare through at a jar of real chunky cut marmalade. This is getting me nowhere, but at such moments, with you again for a moment, I am no longer sure where I want to get. If we realized at each moment that each moment could come to this, would we not stand still and alone, afraid to move?

A knock at my heart, but it is only her, tired but bright. The shops were packed, forgot her bag, could have got a carrier but forgot to ask while she was still in the

queue. Well how about that. She crams packets and tins into the cupboard, goodies to stuff us up like battery hens. Why do I think of her in this stilted jokey way? Is it her failing or my own? Perhaps I simply refuse to risk letting out my feelings to any more tenants. It would be ridiculous if I were to stop breathing for a minute one day, thinking of her eating an apple. Though why more ridiculous than the other? Because it was you, it was you.

All that first wasted autumn and winter, that can go. Bitter walks along the promenade, cheese wrapped up in slices of death's bread loaf, maniac evenings of how you say fun with the other lodgers, my provincial mind curling at the edges, hours spent gazing from my high window at the people who contrived to live in this no man's town. Possibly in all this there is somewhere a unique worth sorting out of the dreary vicious circles of hopelessness, but what troubles me now is something subtler, for which this brutality was only a softening up, as usual vastly overdone.

I saw you from time to time during these months, recognized you quickly and passed on with my head well down, protection against blows to the eye. You having been a class older than me at school, any thoughts I had of you were in terms of that caste system, of that you who had gone off to study in the big city while I was still masturbating my way through my final year. Home on holiday once you had called to see me. Amazed by your sudden metamorphosis from a

stocky senior covered in knees and chasing hockey balls, to a queer soft young woman, and by your light talk of the life I conceived as passionately as a saint dying, I no doubt sat searching for tricky words like really and of course. And now, awakening to find myself wronged and wrong, when I recalled your casual manner you became truly unreachable. Anyone who could not only survive but thrive in that fudge I was clammed up in became part of all that was against me.

It seemed I had come to the end of myself. Quitting school with no desire for any more theory or education I had looked for a place in which to begin my life, and after a long wandering summer ended up in the town of which you had spoken so excitedly. My one natural gift, an ease in music, got me a job vamping the piano in a pub trio, I found lodgings and was ready to begin. Only the beginning was missing, which I could not fix. I had assumed without thought that if I provided the circumstances these would automatically precipitate the action, action still deliciously vague, the unpremeditated real life that would simply happen to me. I was rubbed through a number of raw moments, refusal and rejection, the old story, until the short season ended and my job with it, people dispersed and the town closed its jaws tight. I made up by borrowing a suit from the man next door and giving lessons cut price, but something more important had ended with the summer. My eyes had grown tired, and only a dismal belief that leaving

could solve no such problems kept me in the town to which, in the height of my spring, they had led me.

When you returned, fresh from your holidays, I met you occasionally in the street, even spoke to you once. You were kind and invited me round for coffee, but I said no, though it meant spending another useless evening in the cold cistern of my boarding house. Your pleasant open smile depressed me and sent me scurrying back into myself to question the hard knot I was. You were of the town as much as I, yet were not crushed, seemed even to enjoy it. Where was the fault in me? The more I saw you the less I could believe the town to blame, its squat brute mug moving under your light eyes into a smile that was your own and left me with no provocation for my grim act. For years I had shouted for freedom and room to grow. If this were really it, as you seemed to say in every glance and quick smile, then my dreams had been hollow all along, being no more. The reality I could not take, proven inadequate for the life I had thought my own.

It is cheap comfort to condescend to the past, able to see all round a situation which we once were. If I seem too slick in passing judgement on this time, a bit quick with my explanations, it is only because I know that I shall soon have to enter on all those months in which nothing is clear and any word rings whole changes on the meaning. The code of one is easy to decipher, but toss in another unknown and only idiots and egotists can read. So

just a little clarity before the fog sets in, that fog I love and which is choking me. For although my or your private problems are ultimately straightforward, it is surely only because they are ultimately sterile. All these anguished testaments by heads locked up in dragsville the better to find themselves or not as the case may be, what nonsense really. To put a pea in a thimble, stare at it, steel oneself to lift the thimble and then announce in implacably expressionless tones, there is only one pea. Those who blow their minds find they condense in a prism through which everything is ordered. When the sea is dull my mind follows, when it fires and spumes then I feel there is invention in the world. So leave me my thumb rule to see it through quickly, to leave this solitary and sickly pondering for the confusion of our loving, to leave it, at last, for another such, in the flesh, all this dance of an empty head and walk again down the street, hear again the piece of music that has been humming in your brain, hear it perfectly and with all the odd accidentals you could never quite capture and which made it a real thing of life, similar and yet so different to your beerhouse song.

It was in November, taking a bus home from the station, that I first met you and Peter together. You invited me around to dinner the following evening, he insistently until I agreed. I had realized of course that after a year there you would hardly be left single, but I had no idea who you went with. What did it matter to me?

As it turned out I never got a clear view of this Peter, except that he evidently saw himself as an intellectual, but he is not very important here, a sort of accessory before the fact. I suppose you are saying that now about me, casting back a glance at the path running to meet you. You have the right to say anything love, anything. Or, do you perhaps wonder too about those valleys where it, was it warmer?

At first I honestly felt nothing but admiration for the pair of you. Having found the unfamiliar street, the house, climbed the dark clatter of stairs sprung with lights lasting two steps, suddenly to be welcomed into a nest of warmth and light to find you both with a crowd of your friends. It was the realization of every wish I had ever had. The tight and owned room, the casual group, the light banter about carrots and salt between a man and a girl able to leave all the rest safely unspoken. More than ever I felt the precise nature of my failure, and when on top of this your people seemed pleasant and unsuperior all my old tricks left me. What remained now to account for the months of pall but this self, this pallor that I was?

And then a miracle happened, I saw the act not complete betray its working. In this tight integrity of others, this hopeless achieved otherness, I saw a split open before my eyes, one only, but such as forced everything back into the present, the present which no telling

can ever exhaust. Briefly it became clear to me that Peter's frequent use of the conjugal we was not simply the natural expression of a unity of two I knew I could never achieve. It was the expression of a unity that could never exist, except in so far as he was trying to create it by assuming its presence. To say we are going to a film tomorrow is one thing, but to use we in a grand future tense, we will be staying in this country, we shall probably be settling down in a couple of years, this was not to say we but to say I in the plural.

Perhaps you too had a time love, when we were younger, more than just itself, a time freed from having to try too hard because of the brilliant future we perceived through it, a present suffused with that light, worn thin with that light, so that there was no waning but only a continual and breathless giving away. As if all the materials were there and it needed only certain adjustments, a settled hush and no coughing, for us to live with the richness we found so conspicuous in its absence, a depth denied, a missing link we surprised everywhere as a lack in life and supplied in lighting it from a future perfect in that quality.

And now it all appeared again, seen corridors opening from that single split down endless ways of life not used but one, and that leading, somehow or other, to this landing, this door, this room in which I am sitting

now, closeted again with a present past. Where is the source of that vision that can, as no despair, crack the complacency of the sufficient moment?

Nor was this only myself. One of your friends actually made a light joke about the overworked we, from the shelter of his innocent glasses. Peter hovered a moment in silence, bad taste, nastiness, nastiness. And how strong a taste your silence left as he beat the talk around to politics and civil disobedience but could not plug up that leak in the evening, nor obstruct the view I had through it that there was more here than caught the eye, that even in this alien town others did not always live up to the size of their seeming, that it was in the spell of your silence that I first thought of loving you and knew that I would love you, and in that knowledge was right, but not I.

But the sense, the joy, the plashing like a pigeon on a branch too thick with leaf, all that was mine. I might even risk saying it was yours. I certainly thought so then, and in spite of all that has happened, yes in spite of that it was better you should have left him. But for me? Who can know that, you cannot now have done any other, you can never not be the person who lived with me and shared bed and breakfast, head and heart from that January a year and more to July.

I no longer remember how the rest of that evening went by, or when it was we discovered that we were both

flying home for Christmas, and whether we arranged or if with one of those wild leaps, advance to Go, which fate distributes in handfuls when in the mood, it turned out that we had booked on the same flight. What I do remember, with the nutmeg smell of drowsy happiness, is the smile of conspiracy you gave me as I left that little soirée and walked ran danced and dived down the stairs and out to the night no longer windy but full of wind.

No doubt I thought of you then, but it was not as I have since. I had to be taught to think of a person. Then you were only a weakness in the walls surrounding me, a possibility that called everything in question. All I ask is something to look forward to, to stop me trying to stare out my surroundings and looking back with fond eyes.

We arranged to meet at the terminal. You were late, stainless tones announced the departure of flight you and me. I went for a slash and returning up the sliding stairway saw you revealed head body legs, looking around for something lost. A huge parcelled picture under your arm, your fingers holding the string bent, your white macintosh. Trusting me not to go on before you arrived. Smiles, you cut it fine!

It was like a film, my words, my studied coolness. All along, with my longing to be home again, with the simple pleasure at being with you where people saw not me but us, all along I was thinking this is it, the break you've

asked for so often. Don't waste it, don't waste it.

There is something curiously unreal about all this, something unsatisfying. I stood outside myself and talked, sat beside myself and judged the effect. In the plane you were sick and I comforted you, touched you for the first time and considered how far the effect of my kindness on your debility was likely to advance my cause. I think I even had time for a fantasy about the plane crashing and me carrying you alive and grateful from the burning wreckage. I shouldn't be at all surprised. It was all going at once, the urgency of my need to get hold of you, take your affection in a few hours, together with a dispassionate consideration of you as a thing to be manipulated to this end, all coloured with a distant and hopeless desire for your body. The plot thickens, but basically the mixture is as before. What troubles me now is not here, except that part of it which is everywhere, the pain that this bracing tension of possibilities should have resolved itself, now, completely. What I seek is the root of those that still twitch, uselessly, with no hope of the real raw fact, the sudden appearance as flesh, that gave these their value and point.

That Christmas has left little trace of you. I was back in my element, breathing my own air, and your stature decreased with need. Although I still cared enough to feel dully that you must certainly be fed up with my

shoddy aimlessness after a mumbling evening we spent in some saloon bar, it was not for loss of you but of that exciting set of dreamed lives I had promised myself a choice among when we returned after the holidays. That I regretted, only wanted it not then but kept nicely warm for my bleak tomorrow. Then I had other pleasures.

I owe you an account of them, have long owed it, but what I kept from telling you in live words then, how can I knock it up in writing now? I think there is only one moment when it all becomes clear, and it is this the man strains to say, face contorted, at the moment of death. But though I cannot describe them, I can describe their effect. In short, I was after an ideal woman, a soul mate, a spiritual fuck. I cannot afford to be as scathing as I would like about this, for one eye is still searching. But in practice I have learnt to convert these dreams into personal hard cash and stop confusing my belief in that dimension with its visual metaphors, irregular features, eyes that look back, an uncertain mouth. And anyway there is something a bit sickening about the prospect of two lovers living entwined in eternal oneness, isn't there? It converts at once, faced with half a pound of margarine, to a romantic engraving. Though on another level the thing is still there, as though it were not really an emanation of this life but the echo of another. Anyway these days, faced with a girl of that peculiar melting ambiguity of

expression I at once imagine her having a period, stuffing tampons up her cunt.

But at that time I constantly fluctuated between this scene and that, the world around holding its breath as if at any moment the fusion might occur. And there were moments, only snapshots, and seen from the right angle in a certain light, when it seemed it had. One of them that holiday. The details are banal without the phosphorescence which I cannot convey. Cold house, snowy day, a peculiar girl, a door opened suddenly on a view of mist, a few words, a glance sideways. Yes, it's a bit some enchanted evening and I can hear your rich chuckle. You looked and she looked and you just knew that somewhere sometime somehow. Yes, but not us, not us. Anyway, this cast a spell over the rest of those weeks, a spell others could not break into. And in a way, by strengthening my hopes, it cast its memory over all that followed, even our best time. For I always secretly and deeply longed for the film of which that moment had been a frame, and whatever else you might give me you could never give me that, as indeed, now I see, could anyone else. This longing used many disguises, but eventually settled to that itch to live abroad which, by a long winding way, undermined everything we did. I am not saying of course that we were finished from the word go, but it is true that our love lacked a roof, like the town in which it lived, because of my failure to under-

stand until it was all over the lesson you have really taught me, that although simple human contact can never replace the other, it is no way inferior in depth or values of its own. My love for you was always provisional, and yet it was just this that gave it freedom and fluidity, its unique flavour and one I will never recapture.

Now I don't give at all, can't, yet am always tormented by the possibility of another such flaw in the wall. Where is it?

She doesn't seem to mind though. Of course she is probably playing the same game with me. Oh we're a very modern couple and believe in disengagement before marriage. She wears me in the street like a new ring, while I take her with me to the pub to prove I'm not queer. See fellas, I may be different but I'm similar. Sometimes I think I have no idea what I'm talking about, that all this procession of words is simply a dance in the corner, the attempted deduction of a lost civilization from two dry bones and a cracked saucer. In the course of one of the halfhearted affairs I had after you left a girl said, explaining why she had leched up to me at a party the previous night and wanted none now, I hope you don't think I did that just to make John jealous, a possibility I had never even considered and whose implications, hoped I didn't think because that was precisely the case, leapt up and startled me to silence. Perhaps that is true of this too, and all my windy goings

about are thorough but equally meaningless. But then that would not affect their value, which is not to record in all its manyfaceted whatnot an experience? shared? by two? people whose lives? touched? for a time?? but to save my own life from itself. I want only to deal with those pieces of us that litter my view. Those I am ignorant of, and they must be many, are thank God none of my business. So laugh if you like at my purblind memory, I only wish it were altogether put out and I could do no more than feel what I feel, now.

Back in the tinny town I rang up, embarrassed and hesitant, and arranged to come round for coffee or tea or anything but you. Where had we left it? You smiling in your unconcerned way and driving off down the street which must be full of my youth as an old eye, me sitting in your large empty house being dribbled on by your large empty cat, a letter, quiet but signed with love over your name. How was I to know this was only a lazy habit? It gave me the guts to write you love in return. All was circumstance, the right thing for the wrong reasons, undone without.

My course to the house was sweaty and staggered. For the first time I had to face you uncompromisingly. Till now I had left much unsaid and all undone pending a time that was here, and I was badly scared at the prospect of having to give birth to the future I had so long ex-

pected. The chances of going wrong were paralysing. Say what you like in advance, think it all out, take as long as you like, all your life, still there is one moment when for my part I am completely lost, the moment blinds me, the tension of it saying let's see you do it and thinking yes this is it, I must act, this is where I do it, this is what I'm here for, say yes but it is gone, I can't see it any more, there is no connection with that cup and this cigarette, anything, a moment gone free, each step leading clean over and everywhere. It's not me anymore, I'm not there. And then afterwards, then I'm there all right, and have to live with a filthy mess I don't understand, which is not of my making. For the air clears as soon as I'm alone again, I can see it all straight and easy, and spoilt by my twisted sight.

We were sitting on the bed. I cannot remember what I was saying, nor would I want to for it will have been some trash about love. In that state of labour I knew only one course then, to speak generally of what I was feeling too specifically to make sense of. Spoken generally in the hope that one might induce action in a given direction by discussing exhaustively its possibilities. For else there is only the banal loaded chat I cannot, will not make, no doubt surrounding the point but for me deafened by the words unsaid, please take off your clothes and lie down here beside me, I think you're beautiful. Which leads nowhere

but out. I have tried it. People, for all they sing pretty songs, are dull at heart, and it is no use praising a sweet cunt for her one unique gift, a body whose horizons transcend the four walls of her white tiled mind, no you must respect her for that before she will let you into her brimming beauty.

But as if taking in at a glance my vicious circle, you did the one thing that no girl had ever had the courage or the grace to do before. You cut through five degrees of requalified counter affirmative hypothetical ramifications on the nature of love and put your arms around me with a moan that opened and freed, a break of feeling, a heart attack. And that moan was love, love you were, was you, love. Somewhere surely I can find in me feelings and thoughts worthy of a human being, if I have to drag them from the sneaky laughing huddle and crucify them on the page with words to have them there. I have inspired spontaneous affection in another person, that is the major premiss of my sickness. If even that is to go it is all a nasty farce and no, it is not all a nasty farce, only the strange disintegration of a word looked at too closely. Take what you like but there is order there and I will have it, or cut away the facts till I do. For the facts are not important but a tight collar of them can strangle. The facts say doubt this, doubt that, everything is possible, but it is only a deception to hide the order that right or wrong, true or false, you know is there and which you

have chosen and which will master you unless you find it and show it.

How boring all this has become, all of a sudden. Outside it is a fine January afternoon, three years to the days I am thinking of, when the chain reaction of our kisses began. It is dulling, that reminder, three years, a time too short to be submerged as past, no obstacle between to impair my view of it, yet as irrevocably passed as if we were both dead. I do not want us to die, would, since we must, give us a decent burial, and yet that is intent upon the dying which sickens me. What I hold out my hands for is life, life that comes not to bury the past but to raise itself, inspired, upon its heaped and still warm casualties. The paradox is that I must painfully recreate my love for you in order not to have to love you, scrape off the scum of you that has settled on everything, bury you properly and to that end stay indoors and perform the few rites I know that help the dead to die and we, the living, to live. All this I must remember. It is disturbing no longer to be able to trust any instinct, to have to watch oneself live, in this country not sufficiently foreign.

Before I left that afternoon I asked you to come round to my hideous little room, not really believing even yet that you could mean what your gestures implied. All the long dreary weeks I had sat there, sending not to ask for whom the bell tolled since I knew very well it was not

for me. No I did not dare believe you would appear, or take any credit against event. You had said you would try and get round some time in the next few days, you could not be more definite, you needed time to think things out.

Those days stretched to four, and each one a separate hurt. While I often overlook in my good times the component that memory will choose, I rarely miss much when it comes to exploring all the possibilities of despair. Each one of those evenings I sat tight in that room and stared at the wallpaper, an irritating design which seemed always about to reveal some pattern, if only one could see a little more. I lit another cigarette and listened to the silence which had begun to sag like an overstretched drumskin.

The bell rang out on the landing, a door opened to release voices and feet running down the stairs, a muffled conversation below while in my room a tough fly which had survived so much winter crawled the wall a few inches and stopped. A door slammed, voices turned the corner, the flash boy of the house returning upstairs with his latest bit of hack. I breathed out and considered that the fact of the bell having just rung did not theoretically affect the odds on you ringing it the next moment. Now, or now, or even now. But by the third night it was becoming clear to me that you were not really trying to get away, rather

trying to think up some easy way of breaking the news to me. After all, you had been with Peter for over a year now, it was ridiculous to think that you would throw over that, for what? The sort of well meant dribble I had been talking? I could see very easily what had happened. You two had been around together long enough to take each other too much for granted. You had been wanting a break for some time. I had come along, and by the association with another world and my own superficial attractions had for the time beguiled you, but increased acquaintance with my real qualities had been disillusioning and you had opted for the unsensational values of a relationship of maturity and depth, to which you would return with added insight and new understanding.

The bell rung again, just as I was getting into bed. I crept to the door and opened it a split. Feet, voices, the front door slammed. I stood without myself, trying to divide the footsteps in two. A voice called, stupid bitch, I told her to fuck off last time but she keeps coming back. A door clicked. Mine shut with no sound.

I have never gone gentle into my goodnight, loathing the prospect of leaving the world as much as I do the fact of rejoining it the next morning. It is bad enough when there are things doing, but the unique low when there is nothing to do but sleep, when waking life has broken all its promises, reminding one quietly that it never promised

to keep them. I turned out the light.

That sudden hug you gave me? Easy enough, a wash of pity for my feebleness, my vulnerability, a compensation for what you would no doubt have liked to be able to feel, but did not. Easy enough. His bark was always better than his bite.

The next day having in its literal way dawned I considered how best to cut short this absurd anticipation. But while I knew that otherwise I would only have another evening of seizures every time the prick went down to audition the latest partner for his turn, I knew equally that my pride would not let me go and see you unless you came to see me first, in which case etc. I finally decided to go and watch an epic film, all blood and corn, leaving you to arrive with your false apologies to an empty room, to a busy man not at home, with a life of his own to lead and no time to sit around waiting for some girl he had never taken seriously anyway. I was just shaving when the bell rang and I would like to thank the inventor of the safety razor. Footsteps went down, voices came up, footsteps followed them, up the impossible final flight to my door, which opened. The stallion stood there and announced with an amused and curious smirk that there was this bird wanting to see me. Send her, I replied full of cool, up. He nodded and went away. I had joined the scene.

A knock, come in. You appeared in the doorway, white raincoat, green dress, fawn sweater, swaying hair, bright eyes, firm flesh, more real than anything that hideous house had ever seen or had any right to see. I towelled myself unconcerned, put on my shirt and waited, trying to find the right words to say. But it seemed that the trench between us, to me so huge and forbidding presumption, was for you only what in fact it was, four days. You had little patience with my questions why you had not come, and faced with your actual presence there in the room I too began to accept what a moment before had seemed the longest wait in my life, so utterly enthralled was I by your being there in that place consecrated to depression and despair, as a trout glimpsed in a gummy canal. You moved in the room, and it became just a room. You looked out of the window and it became something to look out of. I hardly took in what you were saying. Seen Peter, told him, very cut up, you had been confused, right thing, you, me, him, me, you. Me. You were saying you had chosen me. You stopped and looked around, vaguely. I went over and touched your shoulder, bent over your face, still half expecting you to turn from me in disgust. But your mouth took to mine and stayed there, and when I paused to check your face you made only a helpless sound in your throat and drew me back.

Forgive me for spending time here, love, but in reliving this I see that it is one of those very few high-water marks we have to look back at afterwards and say, that is possible for it happened then, whatever happens to me now that cannot be denied, and a life where such things are possible cannot be altogether cheap.

When it grew dark we left the room to walk back to yours. On the landing a door opened, curious eyes showed. Outside it was calcine cold, the shop windows we passed were bright, I put my arm around you and began trying to walk comfortably so, a thing I never quite managed.

It is the key to much if not everything how far my mind is limited and determined by mood alone. I who a few hours before had felt that nothing waited between me and suicide except the act with its absurd detail, now I was suffused with the wild confidence conferred on me simply by being wanted, simply by having the weight of that to throw in when the scales were on tilt. And with the blindness that has caused me so much pain I leapt from one absolute to another. When I despaired I was despicable, now I exulted no one could reach me, the dead man could never be revived, the reborn never sicken. Never did it occur to me that this happiness you had not given but lent. You I hardly considered except as the faceless agent of my good fortune so long overdue. And when I did it was disparagingly. From the height of my

proper dignity I gazed down and noted the ways in which you fell short of my ideal companion, who was of course waiting round any corner, ready to welcome with open arms the new and magnificent me. I remarked your triteness of speech, your lack of insight, your inability to appreciate the depths of my suffering, also a few physical blemishes, face a little too common, your hair perhaps too short, a neat rather than ample bosom, good legs though. I summed up by thinking, I remember this, remember it clearly, thinking that you were certainly not a girl to occupy my side for very long, but would do to keep me company while I looked round for a better.

That evening you told me about things, slices of you cut coarse. That you and Peter had been breaking up anyway, before the holidays, that he had decided it might be better to part for a few months, to see how organic the relationship was. I broke into howls of laughter at this and suggested that perhaps we should at once separate for seven years, to make sure we were really suited to one another, and you joined in the laughter. It seemed some last link was broken. But the way you said Peter and I, though no more than habit, sobered me with its reminder of the very dead weight of your time with him. I could never imagine you using my name in such a phrase.

Later on I realized how late it was, after the last bus, and began to groan about the long cold walk back and the dismal prospect of my room. You could stay here if you like. A moment of still as yet another fat wall collapsed. And

then it became quite natural that you should invite me to sleep with you, you who had already shown yourself tuned rather to the speed of my thought than to my idea of how people behaved. Ever since I met you my theme had been a flabby philosophy of love, half digested gobbets from a pack of books, wordy patterns whose beauty I admired and nowhere paused to ask myself if I had lived these words and knew more than how they were spelt. Among these enlightened scribbles was the idea that two people in love would naturally sleep together as a matter of course, any other being a distortion of reality and a lie. Not that I want to disagree now, it is only the memory of parading these views that I find funny, and a bit touchy, as a dressed core come to light again. And so I assumed you either were or wanted to show as enlightened as I, and accepted the offer of your dressing gown as a wrap.

We undressed suitably, with no admitted embarrassment yet revealing it by not watching each other. I drew the gown over my hairy legs, wondering vaguely what they could be doing in your bedroom. While washing my face I glimpsed through soapy water your breasts, and was surprised by a total lack of desire. You bedded first and I clambered over you and lay against the wall, making myself an exhaustion too great to think in. We turned and kissed chastely and you put out the light. I stroked your hair in an affectionate but genuinely passionless way, feeling with satisfaction a duty not to want you. And in this soft and awkward in-

timacy I heard you say, you know I'm not a virgin don't you? I blustered out my disinterest one way or the other and in a delicious euphoria of confidence confessed that I was. We kissed again, brother and sister, and, as in the fairy tales, fell asleep at once.

I had set the alarm for seven, not wanting any complications at my lodgings, and woke as easy as a bird landing on wire, at once totally awake in a world awakened. The heavy curtains breathed quietly the air flowing icily through the window, swaying heavy and dark red, keeping from us the day outside. The noises of the street below were sharp and brisk, a breeze of life I had quite forgotten. You lay mumbled up in sleep in the smooth undulating room. I dressed quickly and without regret, stepped to the door, squeaked it and went out. A girl making breakfast in the kitchen smiled sleepily at me as I passed, absolute and firm, exactly filling my image, taut as canvas down the stairs. Outside in the street I waited for the bus in the bitter misty air. Three workmen stood coughing and chatting. I bought a packet of cigarettes and waited with them as of right. And in the filthy stale gasping bus I sat seeing everything, squalid breath and morning haze, fag ends and sea glint, everything was exact and proper and I was part of it, all the voices in my head stilled, a simple piece at last.

This full content stayed in me the rest of the day, and was only drained by our tangle with the mechanics of sex. There can be no point in reviewing all our calendar of fumbling, and my memory has in any case dropped most of those painful details. In pattern it all seems highly amusing now, the first and most violent reminder of just how feeble my grand phrases about love really were. This moment, which I had assumed in advance would naturally see the fine flowering of our love in a simultaneous burst of smoke, sperm and hard gemlike flame, that this should on the contrary prove a total deflation and reduction to the weird unreal world of those books where he and she are specified like steam engines and then, inexplicably in this context, advised to get married first, that this anonymous world with its generalised problems and faceless mating should suddenly obtrude on the close particularity of our one affair was maddening and mad.

I just could not get a stand, and during the hours this lasted it was excruciating, more especially as I had no reason to suppose that this failing was not, to turn a phrase, congenital. But what wrenched me as much was the sense of being brought to the very brink and tip of a passage into the open country I had glimpsed that morning, and to have my flesh rubbed in the grit of facticity at this of all moments. You were tolerant, though this only made it worse another way, but there was little either of us could

do. We went down and out to the dingy pub stashed away in an alley behind my lodgings, rightly diagnosing tension and wrongly prescribing drunkenness. And back to the room. And back to the pub. And back to the room, where you told me to shut up talking about it, if I couldn't screw you the least I could do was let you go to sleep in peace. Oh that hurt all right, the more because I knew your sticky heat and shivering skin gave you the right to say it, the more because it was me to blame, the most because it was not, because I was made the infliction of this nausea on you, you, for what I thought my body's fault.

And was perhaps a little the place's, for we made it the next day, in the afternoon of your discreet room. I am surprised the volume of our loving after has not swallowed it up, but no, I can still feel it in my thighs now, like an old ballet dancer, the awkward jogging rhythm and stunning sense of release as the middle of my body fell away and all my heavy flesh dissolved into the vacuum left, while from a head as high as you like I floated and watched it all happen, myself and myself.

But all this is boring, local colour. Where are you? With all this happening to me I could hardly be expected to distinguish between you and fuck. On, on. In the fear of leaving out something vital, yes and the pleasure of reliving something vital, I am probably dragging in a lot of irrelevant chat. But how to distinguish? Where to draw

a line that can only be an arrangement of the eye? But then is it not the eye's ideas I want to find out and extract from the living tissue? Is it in fact? Or is all that only an excuse to dabble again in the very thing I supposedly went to escape? The sweetness of life then and the sweetness of memory now. I wanted to affirm the one as clean and deny the other as sick. That was it. I don't know. How can I get hold of you? I can remember your beauty, or your wit, or some of the things we did, or what you were like in bed, but all separately, nowhere can I find that person, that continuum of being that you were. Then I was inside, now out I can only ever see half the sphere.

And anyway is this the way to do it? This convenient chronological account with footnotes? No, it is true neither to the reality which made a blank future shape and colour, nor to the memory which retains most clearly not all this junk of our youth, but a few scenes from our autumn, a few idealized scenes which the mind has worked into art, yes, bearing no relation perhaps to the event, sentimental if you like, but truer and clearer than all this fresh claptrap of blind existence. This is why you haunt me, this is the sickness, these memories where we are become both more and less than we were, where the thrills and squalor of opacity are turned to a pure dead translucent gaze, a rigid dance of death that carries hidden in its steps some sense of which it is but the emblem.

This is the ground swell which spoils my stomach, which I am trying to still, a stillness I want done but not to do. Anyway, how can I hope to batter out a resolution with the time it takes my clumsy hand to contain the pith of even half a day? Only if I could resume both life and line in one word each, a word binding like barrel hoop all the richness and resource of each in turn, then only could I see and perhaps look away. But the hint not grasped and the view half seen fascinate my eyes, I undermine myself with my very words, themselves creatures of artifice, of memory. How could it be possible to write oneself into reality? Nonsense, as the letters should have proved to me at the time. The fusion I seek is impossible, the elements nowhere meet. However brilliantly I might spell out our life I can never write your kiss or describe the shape of your face as it was, as, somewhere, it still is. Always more or less, writing makes emotion angular and assertive, plasters raw lumps of duration on the page and creates a stage of actors overplaying their parts grotesquely. Eyebrows are raised by heavy machinery and if someone smiles the whole room splits open. It is impossible. With words I can only create the stuff of words, a brass rubbing of our love, life as a flicker glancing over the absolute sterile form my mind has found beneath, a life revealing not its own being but the patterns it creates in being, a gaudy flag to show which way the wind is blowing.

It is meaningless to even ask what I want. How can I know what I want until I am having it? All I know is that I am tired now, tired of this dead dead bloody jigsaw puzzle which I cannot free myself of though I write myself inside out. I don't know what I want, it's too huge and confusing and transient and changing and I feel in the sick spin of a drunken head. I do know what I want, equally hopeless, I want, now, tonight, your oh fine warm body to lie beside me in bed and kill the spin, and I don't care whether this means I'm opting for life or death or health or memory or art or anything. I just want to be with you again, out of it all, and it's a childish lesson I still haven't learnt, that to want something with the intensity I want you now is as empty and useless as trying to draw the shape of love in words.

With her beside me I remain spun up in self, she cannot meet me at any point. She wanders to the bed, her clothes drop from her, the binding falls off her big tits, she unstraps her thighs and climbs into bed as to a bath, gazes over at me without smiling. Later on I shall go and get up on her, without preface. Unlike a pump she does not need priming. Why can't she touch me, give me what I so much need, a point of reference outside myself? She is like a creature hastily assembled to the specification Woman, in every word and gesture she seems to say, I'm for screwing and getting babies and feeding them and feeding you. It is just that she's a stupid cow, or is it that these layers of

association I am working my way through are so thick that I never see what it is about her that transcends parody? I came back deliberately to this town, thinking that here I must pick up the threads again. But it will not happen now. It is as if a place can be exhausted like soil, as if everything that can happen to me here has happened, and all I get now are poor stunted experiences. When we went home that Christmas you could hardly touch me, tuned to a quite different pitch, when we went abroad in the summer the tension between the town in us and all that strange hot landscape fired drove cracks right through our sight of each other. And your letters, was not their lack of sympathy perhaps after all only a record of your inability to go on feeling for one scene while being opened like a can by another? Then that is what has happened here. I have returned to set this all down, to void it, but that cannot prevent me continuing to exist. And there I am still trapped in a system of worn connections, shiny grooves that channel every new vibration back into line and allow it value only in terms of that already dead and used. Everything must seem a poor relation of what has passed. It is not her fault she appears a parody of a person, it is mine for living in a parody of reality, with eyes that will only see this life as a bad imitation of that unique and dead world. There is nothing to be got here now but that world and it is that I must get, no new, get it and fix it so that when I

go I go unattended, never again to be surprised by one of your long brown hairs waiting for me, in the seams of an old jacket.

And now a window opens on our loving, the window of that one quiet noisy close open dark light room. You can see, drawing back the gauze, down the street to the promenade at the end, and beyond it the sea, yellow with turned sand, waves breaking far out and rolling in under a brittle winter sun. Two students in duffle coats and scarves wander along the footpath hand in hand, he holding a crumpled white carrier bag. The old nosey lady opposite twitches the curtain aside and watches them go past, regretting her own. Next door in the vegetable shop the asthmatic and cheery cockney weighs up onions. One and eight. Ta guv, and ten's half a dollar. Mercy boo. And boo to you too. In the main street buses make their unwieldy way from this eye to my old cold socket. 1 1A 3 3A and 40. Perhaps I could plot our love simply with a list of bus routes?

Gradually we settled into a way of life, and how easy everything was made for us. The girl sharing already spent weekends with her boyfriend, breaks which became longer each time until one week she forgot to come back and we had the whole huge room to ourselves. And I too, as the days passed I went back less and less often to my lodgings, sleeping sometimes in the spare bed and others in yours, as we felt either tired or loving. And all with a continuity,

a growing out of which we were scarcely conscious, so seamless an extension of first affection was it. We never sat down and decided to live together, we found ourselves doing so, but not as an arrangement made, as the place it was at simply. Afternoon hours teaching pimplly misses to play the scales mother loved to hear saw me through to cigarettes and food, and when I finally broke with my unregretted lodgings I was even able to reduce that hole in the day to fit only those few who actually seemed to like music, plus one girl whose face I liked to watch as she wrestled with a chord not made for her mitten hands. I have always accepted the temper of the day as it comes, taking for granted both extreme good luck and peculiar lack of it, concentrating only on the outcome, the product of these singular quantities. I could never get excited about the stage management of our piece, too intent on what you were saying, how you moved. Nor did I ever cease to regard you as anything but an understudy for my eventual and destined partner Miss Right, at which point idealism and popular fiction sink slowly into the west together, singing as they go. Let us instead look at a few snapshots.

You're cleaning your teeth. You always reminded me of a child when you did that, washing your teeth as you put it. With real soap? I asked. Bent over the handbasin in the far corner of the room, that mobile helmet of hair swaying as you brushed away with hysterical enthusiasm, your

blue and white checked nightdress mimicking the hair sway about the skin that I would, in a brief moment, as sure as anything, be touching. I think there can be very few happinesses to equal that of stretching, feeling the muscles taut and then sweetly sag, in a warm bed and a close brown room, watching you and hearing the footsteps out in the street below, and knowing that after a certain time you would come in, cool shins turning warm against my legs, the banal chatter of nylon turning to the unbelievable originality of the living flesh beneath.

Another evening, sitting reading on the bed since I had taken the table and chair. Picking your nose idly, then suddenly flinging down the book and rifling your handbag for paper handkerchiefs. Announcing in mock furious tones, God damn it where are they, I won't have objects playing me up.

The mornings when I used to get up and go back, simply to be out, simply to lord it over the greasy bacon and eggs and all that shabby existence that could no longer touch me. Standing round the corner from the room where you were still asleep, breathing spumes of cold air and staring at a garage across the road where they also sold motor boats.

My surprise at your quick grasp of some matter countered tartly. Of course I understand these things, they

don't concern me in the least. And you carry on working, ignoring my silly stupor.

Watching you discuss with one of the other girls in the flat some money trouble, not hearing the words, your face glazed with the slight distance set in talking with someone not quite real for you, a reversion to type, the threat of having to insist and thereby craze the gloss, always that embarrassment in the offing. Watching you with fifteen pairs of eyes, dissolving into your own reflections. She leaves, and you are yourself again, my familiar sphinx.

One of those Sunday afternoons we spent on the promenade, sitting on a bench seat, buffeted by a sand-paper wind, discussing our future. I was having a bout of materialism, which always left me closer to you, compressing my dreamy dissatisfaction to a hard concern at the prospects in store, a thought which never troubled my other state. We decided that I was going to join a big company and make masses of money and we were going to go and live in Switzerland where you would be an interpreter and I would be an executive and we would have an Aston Martin and a tasteful but expensive house and perhaps a few tasteful and expensive children. Oh but we were quite serious about it, as our children would have been about their garden games. We unfolded into a deliciously unreal future where life would be ordered as it is in books, and walked back up the street to our room side by side and read the papers and a little

later went out to get some Black Cherry jam for tea. This is one reason why all our messy time together, which God knows was no grand passion, can still bring the tears to my eyes. For its innocence and its gullability, where a pot of expensive jam became in our eyes not just a thing to be eaten, but the envoy of a style of life for which we were both hopelessly unfitted and which, like the best dreams, never came true.

You always wanted to be out and doing, while I sat sluggishly around and let happen. And our little expeditions usually seemed to turn out sad and gloomy, rubbing at our weakest point, which was that you were a creature who desperately wanted Switzerland and I, who would have given you that or anything to see you happy, could only trudge along in your attempts to have life assume the gay solidity you felt it should, and cringe inwardly at your failure to do so. Are you happy now, my love? Now that you seemingly have all the things you want? Not that you are shitting gold yet, but your eye is assaulted and your body tanned, and that is what you wanted. But this is getting too warm. I only want to sketch in the outline here, the heavy colour can wait, for if I started on that now I should not be able to continue with these pictures, seeing them with those eyes.

Piece by piece you showed me the countryside I have since come to know so well, all the looser land around the town I had never thought, eye to eye with it, to break

away from. Days spent here and there, caught in the otherwise too similar weeks rising wearily out of winter. We took a bus along the coast road to a shambling little town of deserted boarding houses and seedy crumbling hotels. On a brilliant day it might have had a sporty, informal air, but that day was overcast and cold, people stayed at home, bulky with warm chicken and peas. The streets were dark with the shower that had passed as we sat peering out of the clammy bus. A few people were about, pretending to be families out for an afternoon stroll, in those merciless streets. We found a path of slimy wet chalk leading up on to the cliffs. You had been here before, with someone. It had been better. I tried to light a cigarette in the streaming wind that blew out every match. Sunday. From the clifftop we reached, you panting like a great dog taking me for a walk, we had a view to the grimy white seabed and dark turning sea, and out where the bleak sun broke through. A nearness and distinct suddenly cut up with wholes of light pured down through the cloud to a sea of curdled lead, far out. And we walked back down to the tight town, tired and cold and not talking. There was no bus for an hour and we fidgeted around the main street, looking in windows full of trinkets and postcards of another town, found a teashop and were ashamed to have to wonder if we could afford it. Cold soggy scones, butter and red jam. But the tea was all right. And then not daring to sit on, we drifted down to the beach,

to the jumble of huge bare deserted houses set in desolate zones of chalky waste, windows smashed, the once smug pathways submerged in weed, a forgotten curtain flapping in the wind from a top window, as if trying to signal something. We turned back to the bus stop, sullen with our dependence on time and others, to find that all we had used was half the hour, to stand waiting, cold chat and yet I would give all this sorry stew for just five minutes of it in my throat again, idling for the bus. Which appeared late but at last and took us back, getting off a stop too soon and shivering back along the promenade to the promise of our own room.

This poverty was a soft sore all our time together, bringing us together in a particular way yet revealing, in the squabbles which our tiredness and depression with it all caused, the worst side of both our natures, our pettiness and pride. But then who am I to say our and we? I can speak only for myself. But at such times we seemed to me two vulnerable people living in a hard world and a harsh town without means of defence. The margarine and cheap cuts of meat we bought did not worry me as food, but as symbols of our life they nearly broke my heart. Yet again this is probably only me, ready as always for an easy weep. But that pathos, that vulnerability and the need of each other that resulted, that is a strand of the disease. Perhaps it wasn't true for you. Perhaps you saw only in one dimension, were sad that Sunday but converted it to a quick determination to get money and a car. Perhaps. But while there is

even a chance of it having been true for you too, and there is always that, then it will remain true. Certainly I always saw our room as a refuge, and us as born victims of life who must stick close together for protection and kindness. Oh if I could only spell out the letters of your name, not even the pet names we made up but your real name. But this is not a letter, it has nothing to do with you. I have finished with that foolery.

And the long lighted evenings, sitting in our room. Another thing that held us together was an awareness of links and chinks that other people ignored, an intimate squint we did not have to correct for each other. Did I not catch a hundred times in your face a beautiful happy surprise when I laughed at a joke you had made for yourself, or at once latched on to some glimpse of that side of you which you had grown dully accustomed, like me, to having politely overlooked by others? That little satisfied grin of yours as we polished off one of those routines that only we seemed able for or interested in. And one that becomes our motto. When you said, I feel all warm and woolly tonight. And then added, knit me into something useful. And I could feel your mind coming together as I rolled about on the bed, helpless with laughter, for the knowledge that another person could reach that most personal of its shelves.

The man upstairs is hurting that woman again. What does he do to her? She moans and then quickly stamps on the

floor, on my ceiling. They talk in low intense drones, like a radio play. Then she howls, No, No, not in my room you don't, my room, mine. The voice of a hopeless moth eaten mind. Does he keep her locked up there, dying for her money? Is she old and mad? Or are they actors rehearsing a scene from a play, in fact? And then screwing on the floor? I go up to the lavatory. The corridors are bare and silent. Their room door shut white. Someone has left a lump of brown dolloped on the porcelain and the lights go out as I come back down the staircase, creaking in the dark.

The spring that hinted at winter, turning, was early summer. We left the window open all day, until the chill of the evening pickled the air inside. Our days opened out as the room changed from a warm cell abstracted from the town done in cold wash to a perch set in the wall of the summer, my first summer in that incredible clear air, alive with the people without and in cool as a bell. Our weeks passed easily and without regard, nothing mattered of all we had stored from the winter, the vehemence of those brute days was suddenly ridiculous, given the bright streets and the scrubbed sky, a book of etiquette from a forgotten age. We grew light and offhand with each other and revelled in a brave freedom and lack of care. We could once again raise our voices and no longer used our time whispering small words to each other in our sealed room. I was happy and didn't give a damn for anybody, the tide was making for me

and the brazen sun shone every idea to its best advantage.

We woke every morning, every morning to the light sheen on the ceiling, the sharp carrying voices, our personal invitation to the day outside, veiled through the curtains into the still room where we lay wrapped up in sloth. Or you would be up already, and my first inkling was of you standing in your faded green jeans and a bra, having just pulled back the curtain, gazing out at the incredibly crisp scene in the street, one forgotten hand feebly scratching your ribs. And I got up and washed and dressed as if it were all being done for me, and went singing down the stairs and out into everything, barging through the liquid atmosphere, over the road to get a stick of bread from the toady baker who had a letter of recommendation from someone sello^taped to his window.

Coffee and eggs and bread and honey and coffee. And a lazy fat cigarette, watching you brushing your hair in the running sunlight, stopping to inspect the split ends intently. Then down the road, towels over our arms and you looking ridiculously sophisticated in dark glasses, in this town where all the best people wear them in bed. Crossing the great road sweeping off along the coast, over the footpath of the promenade and stopping to lean on the thick wooden rail and gaze down at the lower promenade and the beach, the packed heat of the wood searching through our sleeves. You point. We'll go there, it's not crowded yet. Along the hazy asphalt to the broad steps leading down. You

make a joke about our social irresponsibility in going to the beach while others work and then something about your sister who feels one should help others and not indulge oneself. I suggest a few ways she could help me and indulge herself. You laugh. Indulge, you say slowly with a bulge. I put my arm around you but it is awkward, anyway you have forgotten your body. We cross the shore road and then have to wade on the pebbled beach. Just under the lip formed by the waves at high tide we spread out the towels and crouch on them, quiet, stunned by the staring sun.

The heat from the stones is oppressive. We pull off our clothes and lie there in swimming gear, feeling the sun sink in. Then a swim in the cold sea, and back to lie on the towels, occasional brushes of wind sweeping up the heat and dusting the drying salt on our skin. We talked about the holidays that were coming and about what to do, decided to take our love abroad and watch it in another setting. You had to go and spend a few weeks with your parents on holiday, I would do the same and then we would take off. It would be just like this, only better of course. We would have so much new around us and so much old within, and their harmony would be our holiday. And meanwhile my eyes roamed the beach and I ruminated on the infinite variety of women and of my desire for them and how limited a thing possibility was compared to the extensions of thought. I worked up a heaven in which one could reach and possess every

woman in sight with all the richness of a life together, all in the clutch of a pang of lust. Concentrated copulation. I pondered the metaphysical implications of this and went to sleep, bathed in the odour of your oiled skin.

Later, about one, we grew tired and itchy and hungry, rolled up our belongings and climbed the endless hammering steps up to the promenade. Along the draughty street and back to our room, as own as ever. And when we drew the wrapping curtains were left in disturbing dim depths without meaning after the primal timbres of the beach. And in this close silence of washing salt from our costumes and ourselves the flesh came alive and sought another, after the thrusting stones and raw salt incredibly unreal in its isolation as texture, firm and cool with tapwater. Taking the globe of your breast in my palm as you dried your legs, you straightening and kissing, dropping the towel on my foot and grasping my penis with your bare hand, our tongues fouled up, crushing time and coming awake on the tossed bed. The window open to the free air and street, the curtain swelling gently as we made love. And the curtain sways more slowly and ever heavier as I chase the lines of every girl on the beach across the distended nudity of your own sweet fevered face, crying out aloud. The curtains were still and the street was silent, the vast blinding day emptied.

We made lunch of cheese and bread and spent the afternoon reading in the room, propped up in chairs with our

feet on the window sill. Until you let the book slide and your head hang, up and stumbling over to the bed for your afternoon nap. I always wondered at the way you could slide in and out of sleep as it suited you, like a child, and like a child vicious if disturbed. The day wore on, I found it harder and harder to broach each new chapter and wished I could turn off like you. And then something unexpected and wonderful occurred, the day outside went quite mad. It was only a thunderstorm after all, but a spectacular full colour production such as I had never seen. It grew dark very quickly, but it was not until I noticed a lack not of light but of resonance in the atmosphere that I looked at the time and realized that darkness was not nearly due. And then the rain started, the first full single drops steaming on the hot window ledge. The rain thickened and struck up off the suddenly wintered street in a coat of spines. Someone shouted. There was a suffusion of impossible light that left one wondering as with flash bulbs if one had imagined the whole thing, then the explosion, directly above. It seemed the least the town could do in response to this gaudy exhibition was to have a few buildings collapse in flame and cracks appear in the street. But our stolid traditions are otherwise, there was only a stony silence of disapproval and the hired applause of the rain. More and longer thunder bursts sounded, the clown splitting the seam of his trousers in a desperate bid for enthusiasm. But

civic dignity won the day and the storm slunk away with a few dying rumbles, like the old man who no longer heeds his blunt dismissal and goes on repeating some line from his story as he wanders off.

And with a delightful disinterest in the glories of nature and vulgar thunder fright you turned over as the fabric of heaven split apart and remarked sleepily, tell them to call back later.

With the clearance came yet another light, a dry white illumination, and the smell of rotting rope as I opened the window again. As I relive this I can sense how it all happened to me, only when I come out of my head and look around me now, at this room, at her asleep all over the bed, at the table with its jar of coffee and loaf of sliced bread, then it seems quite another matter. I can imagine reading these words written by someone else and thinking, if only that would happen to me, but it never would, never could. That is why my mood now is so much worse than it was three years ago. Then I thought life a barren maze the same in any incomprehensible direction, but now I torture myself with the knowledge that behind one of those hedges I stumbled on a great park and pleasing prospect, with the ease that only pure chance can afford, as if it acted merely to enrich my despair.

When you woke finally it was deep dusk. The clouds

remained to form a broken mirror in which the setting sun reflected itself. We walked down the promenade and I felt absurdly happy and in contact with things. We had had our morning and afternoon as the town had had its, and now we were going through the hot evening air to complete the day. We went to an expensive restaurant where the waiters pretend to be Italian and throw the food at you, and I had them throw some at us. What the hell, it would soon be the holidays, we had enough money. Were we not the tanned and indolent aristocrats of the earth, our skin tailored by no common sun? I found your tendency to draw attention to small unpleasantnesses of service and cuisine both bourgeois and unalluring. I shall fuck me another bird, said I to myself, a brown son of love. And it seemed I was so potent then I could have imagined a woman to my side and created her flesh from the rib of pork I was eating. Just help me up on to the table and I can walk around on thin air, but when I fall off trying I'm down for good. It's the first few feet I never learnt to climb. With a little help from my friends. And then bye bye friends, you're so small I can hardly see you. We were pretty well stoned by this time, what with two bottles of wine and various liqueurs, and we jumped home in two big strides, stopping off to admire the moon making faces at itself in the scalloped sea. And back in our amazingly faithful room, which never turned a hair whatever we did in it, we put on some witty neurotic harp-

sichord music, opened the window and got drunk a second time, on distilled air. And you collapsed while doing a fandango on the bed and started to perform bicycling actions in the air so that your nightdress tumbled down around your belly, firm tyres of brown flesh. I took a last swig of the night, rolled up the starscape and ate it like a pancake, belched slightly and came to bed where I went to sleep with my hand between your legs, my head risen like dough under a cloth and without question.

The final day before we parted was, as all the others, clear and hot. We went to see some friends who lived in a village outside of town, behind the downs that stand facing the sea all along this coast, and the towns spread between. It was one of those days when there is no wind until the evening and the stilled air thins and spreads, changing the stature and colour of buildings and trees. The bus was close and sweaty and when the doors opened to let someone board a sudden wave of cool passed through and licked our faces. We got off at a stop on the road and walked up the narrow lane bound in with tall banks and trees. It was totally silent but for the distant yawn of passing cars behind us and the stepping of our shoes, the startle of a bird calling out its nest. You were sweating and flushed, we walked slowly, soaking in the warmth around us.

The land turned around and we entered the streets where children were chasing each other through the unresistant air while their parents washed cars or sat on the lawn

reading. That afternoon we spend drinking coffee and chatting about the holidays and what we were going to do abroad. We were in form and energetic, we drew lines round the future and gave it names. It was late in the day when we got up to leave and walk back over the downs, a few miles only. We waved goodbye and went off down the long avenue with its margin of cherry trees, at the end of which the chalk track opened up the face of the ridge. The sun was low and we were in shadow as we climbed the track, surprisingly steep and twisting over the terracing of the chalk. We paused, out of breath, and looked down at the village, already small and distant. The people we had been visiting were sitting on their back lawn again and somewhere a radio was playing. We turned ourselves to the track again, for it was cold in the shadow and our sweat was drying. Coming over the top on to the high downs the sun struck us full in the eyes, red with haze, glancing plane over the bare ground and swept by a strong wind off the sea. We stopped and looked back from the height we had reached over all the county. The land lay rich with sunlight, basking in the glow of a late summer afternoon, running out as far as the eye could follow. A hawk trapped in amber hung in the diffused light and below the land was silent and settled, banked with warmth and small scenes lost in the sweep of the eye covering the long miles of landscape to the hopelessly remote horizon.

We turned back to the chalk track and before us lay the harsh silhouette of the town, the black houses and impatient sparkle on the surface of the sea. Everything was foreshortened, in tones of grey, a skeleton superstructure rivetted on to the sunset, that great disc that slid down into the waiting cloud and left the town empty and the air chill, the ground at our feet uneven and dirty, our faces cold and the day finished.

This morning is fine. The sun cauterizes the streets in a mockery of summer, the wind is strong and rattles the window in its grooves. A copy of our room, find the differences. Through the glass smeared with drying salt I can see the waves striking in against the groyne, occasionally knocking up a spout of spray which wraps down on the promenade, a cable of water. If people had only half the talent for being that the sea has, how easy it would all become. If we too could live from wavetop to wave, a massed shatter of curls falling over from sheer speed of invention, sluicing out and breaking back, a time and movement renewed every instant and yet playing for eternity. But at the bottom of our minds, even in our surest moments, undermining them, is the sense of our limit, a continual irrelevance.

From the day we left town our love changed, lost balance and began to question. No doubt I had presumed too much, taken as usual now for ever. But I think really you were as little satisfied with the idea of our affair as I was. You wanted another kind of life, faster and more colourful, and the kind of man who would lead you it. But of course we forgot our ideas in living, took what was there with only a vague, rather pleasant reservation about its

value to us in some last resort. And in this sense our love was altogether a trick of the town, for it depended on a compromise between our ideals and our actions, a compromise that was only a force of habit, of association with our physical lives, the room and street, the beach, the sea and the town. With that removed all the chafing minutiae of the other caught the eye afresh, and were examined under the hard light of personal strategy, where nothing is settled and people are taken at their plain weight.

First of all there were the letters you sent me while on holiday with your parents. It was only a month, but I had never been parted from you for a day before, for half a year we had been living together and I had not noticed myself grown used to it. I wrote you long and passionate letters, all about how much I was missing you, to which you replied by saying that you were having a great time and describing this in a general way, ski sticks and restaurants, gateaux chateaux, knickerbocker glory and oodles of shoes, apologised for not writing more but you were so busy rushing around.

Grief loves company, and your not needing me to feel fulfilled, but it hurt me far more because of your inability to understand what your breezy letters were doing to my heart, with their complete disinterest in anyone not having a good time. Apart from a few lines at the end they could have been written to your aunt, and those lines, worst of

all, came from that streak I had already tried to tease out of you, that healthy social horsey streak that ran all through your sickening family but had miraculously touched you only as a stock reaction to problems you were not really interested in. Face to face I could laugh you out of it, this smug assumption that every personal question is basically transparent, the answer being a fecking good gallop and a quick game of squash. What saddened me was the realization that my feelings were among the things you did not really care about just then. And as my letters got more and more convoluted and subjective in a desperate attempt to make my reality real for you at a distance of several hundred miles, so you grew the more impatient with these ingrown maunderings that intruded upon and were in such sickly contrast to the busy doings of your own days. It was only a month, you reminded me with devastating accuracy and inconsequence. Yes, it was only a month, but never had I lived such a month. For the first time in my life the idea of time became real and material to me, I could feel it passing minute by minute and longed to take it in my hands and bend it, to bring the day nearer.

But, as you just refrained from observing, nothing lasts for ever. On a day dully similar to all the others I took a boat and train to the station where I hung around waiting for you to arrive, not really believing that out of the massed crowds assembled to make the place look authentic you would at a moment appear, startling in your substance.

But you did, though the startle was how very unsubstantial you seemed as your mother handed you over with a few well-chosen words about taking care of you. Oh yes mam I'll say. Not arf.

But any tendency to gaiety was at once dried up by the calciferous sophistication of you. You had bought new clothes of course, but you had a new manner to go with them, and within the cool voice that I had learnt not to fear there was a new note of distance. I felt as if I was walking beside a model, being photographed in suitably elegant stances against a daringly drab background of ordinary humanity. So in this strangely stilted way we set off for foreign parts, my chameleon manner soon adapting to the new smooth you. Any reference to the spring of the year, to that secret sense of life whose ciphers we had used to recognise with quiet pleasure in each other's conversation, in fact any suggestion that we had previously met at all would, I felt, be taken in very bad taste, like recalling the star's early career as a stripper. And as for kissing you, which I had waited vacuous weeks to do, that would clearly be tantamount to telling you take your knickers off, if indeed it was possible that you could know what knickers were. The contact with high life and holidays had apparently realized for you the vague stuff of your winter daydreams, and left me with no person but rather an alien and frighteningly coherent persona that I could only do my best to live up to for the

moment, and hope to gradually unbewitch by force of propinquity.

This was all very well, but I was randy as a tom-cat after four weeks and your continuing air of being in a film began to get the worse of stronger things than my malleable mind. After all, it was my side you were displaying yourself at. I tried to kiss you in the train, but it didn't really work, you dealt with me as you would have a speck of dust in your eye, or a flaw in your quite flawless makeup. Everything was all right as long as I remained neutral, did not move and blur the plate. You told me in studied tones that I must be patient, wait for you to adjust. To my bad coarse jokes and grovelling desire for your mouth, your flesh oh my love and your hair. And all I could think was that you had not been looking forward to seeing me, that I was not expected but might be suffered, because I loved you.

This silence between us lasted right through the holiday, and if I am not going to bring back those months in detail it is because they were no more than detail, a confused and glossy dream, as unreal as the picture postcards we sent home. It was a break in living, but a break so complete as to be meaningless. We learnt as little about ourselves as we did of the country we stayed in. Everything unfolded at the same level of tourist sightseeing, too many climaxes and no view of the commonplaces which nevertheless refract through themselves an image of love.

The scenes we lived were too secure and loud in themselves, all outgoing, we could only stand and stare. In these surroundings you were able to keep up the faceless act which would have looked pretty silly in the recurrent pattern of our lives at home, but we had to come back to the town for that, the quiet things and for me the only ones that really matter.

But we cannot merely write off the holiday, for all that. It occupied after all two of the eighteen months we were together, and left its marks on the nine we had left. It was a halfway house too exact to be coincidental. It left us ill at ease with each other, broke up the contented routine we had evolved without trying and dispersed the freshness and spontaneity which had informed that life simply because it extended in an unbroken line from the day we had met. Then it seemed only a few days we had been together, the form of our life was an expanding spiral fired by the shock of first love, still related to that shock and those early days of exploration. Every time I kissed you it was a print struck subtly altered from the block of kisses we had made, every plunge into the bell of your loins was a variation on that first crude theme of fuck. It was a civilized life because it involved a constant development of certain basic and continuing lines, at work in detail and at rest in large.

But the holiday was something totally new and unrelated to all that had gone before, without lineage, a revolution in our lives when strange pieces of ourselves came floating up to the surface, pieces that would not fit our limited ideas of each other. It was our loss of innocence, our fall, for by that autumn we seemed to have been together for years and to have grown stale, wondered if our affair had not simply run its course and began to take into account the provisional escape clause always implied in our agreements. Our love had very quickly passed into middle age.

And all because we were let loose, without givens or rules, sustaining fictions, leading an exotic and baseless existence in a country not real for us, among people whose language we did not understand, under a murderous sun which reduces all time to a grain for ever now. It is no wonder we lurched from extreme to extreme, two bats in the belfry, sounding any combination that occurred in the heat of the moment. One minute I thought you an icy stuffy socialite and wished you would piss off and go dancing or whatever would leave me free to chat up the incredibly sensual woman who was lying on her elbows in the sand, staring at me and showing me her breasts. The next I asked you for the first time to marry me, which you very reasonably refused to decide on the spot, and a moment later I was telling you to go fuck yourself with the yank who kept following us around and stop dragging me after you in your search for so called fun. It was all gone wild, all a dream, but not simply

voices in the dark. It was to you that I said all these things, it was you who presented to me this shallow parody of a person I had known. None of the things we did or said on that holiday had the slightest concrete effect on our lives, but the fact of having said them did, for it spattered our images of each other with so much irrelevant filth that we could never recapture the simplicity of our first months. Perhaps you think I exaggerate that simplicity. No, it is all the difference between a map and the scribbles of a tired child on a rainy day. That map of love we had lost for good, and found our way, when we bothered to try, only by never leaving home, where we suffocated in safety.

You had resigned the business of finding a room to a friend of yours who had stayed in town over the summer, and it was she who turned up the drab annexe bricked on to one of those houses lined in endless rows along the endless flat straight streets at the dead end of the town, a pompous slum of avenues cutting always at the proper angle, never a curve to disturb the empire of mediocrity. A ghetto of good taste left between the brash town and the dockyard, insulated from both by the appalling silence of the old and dying. We bickered enough afterwards over your agreement to lease such a place for the year, I can only suppose that in your magazine world of slippery ease you felt yourself immune to this, as to so much else. How should I know why you took the damn place, any more than I should know what incredible

stroke of luck removed your flatmate that spring and left us free in a world of our own, except that in both cases the set perfectly complemented the action. But then one of the most durable effects of memory is to colour our perception of place as a factor influencing how we live. Should we blame our actions on our surroundings, or our surroundings on our actions?

All I know is the familiar slight tightening of the heart, a reduction of expectation from infinity to a real number, and how tight it was when I arrived that October afternoon and was shown around. The sitting room, where I looked in vain for a black cross indicating where the body was found, the eatery in a passage leading to the kitchen with a pair of french windows to cool the food and provide access to the small yard and decaying garden. The kitchen, and opening off it three doors, one to the alley leading past the side of the house to the street, one pair of double doors giving into a passageway convertible bathroom also containing a larder, and one door yes it does stick a little on the lino leads into our box bedroom, one single bed and enough floor to walk round two sides of it, centrally cooled by an illfitting window and running cold water down the walls because the whole place is jerrybuilt on to the main building. A second door from the bedroom leads to the lavatory and washbasin in convenient proximity, the interpretation of whose sound effects affords constant entertainment to the occupiers of both this room and the master bedroom

opening off the lavatory and occupying the entire width of the annexe at the back. This had been taken by the woman and her lover seeing as how they had done the work. Four bare cupboards, two damp single beds, one french window to the grounds and a door to the bathroom convertible passageway thence back to the kitchen again.

We came out into the street and walked back up to get a bus into town. It was a hot sleepy afternoon, and I felt then that taste on my tongue that was to become the very hallmark of that place and what it did to us.

I was sickened at the whole sleazy scene, told you as much, at which you went petulant as a spoilt child and said there was bugger all I'd ever done about finding a place, what did I expect with the money we had, if I was so fussy you weren't asking me to live there why didn't I find somewhere better. I meant to anyway but that is not the point. I missed entirely the hollow in your peevish voice, the first hint of your landing rough after the long pleasure flight. You were asking me for help, and all I felt was what a drag you could be at times. Some money I had lent you over the summer you repayed when your grant arrived, and with this I took the first room I could find at the proper twisty end of town, an icy abode on the rise above that street we had lived in ourselves, once upon a time. It was nothing, just a room. I could have found better, a room for two, a refuge and alternative, but I was

lazy, I would have had to find work again, flat hunting a bore. I took the place for the huge abstract canvas on the wall, which the landlord removed a week after I moved. Anyway, we had never bothered to worry for ourselves before. The town took care of that, and would again.

It turned out that the nearest bus stop that would take me across town to you was exactly the one that had used to take me, early in the morning, home to soggy breakfast at my boarding house. It was there I waited each freezing night, having walked down the hill, learning how very far out you were, since the list of buses I could take was reduced to two and I came to know those final divergences which in fact distinguish one route from another, while for my previous simple needs they had all been one. These are the jottings that surrender this life of ours. Isolation in a great sprawl of ugly houses stacked up tight, and trapped in the centre the very gloomy of gloomies, the inner grot of depression, our room, with all around it the red brick walls. The room, the flat, the house, the street, the suburb. All this became flatly clear as the cold minutes and useless buses passed me, standing at that same stop, just round the corner from the four steps leading up to our room, ours no longer. I felt as if it were you, that room, and I had left you and saw you sitting with someone else, laughing, that room with the light on and curtains drawn, where some strange person slept in our bed.

And now I still do not know who they are, only the sudden thumps and maniac howls percolate down. What should I do? Complain to the landlord? Or perhaps write a stiff letter to the paper. Dear Sir, Allow me to appropriate a modicum of your space to comment on the deterioration in the standard of behaviour of young people occupying my old room. I well remember that when I. When I was reading the paper the other night I came across a little paragraph in the advice column, where Auntie Madge was replying to a teenage secretary who had fallen hopelessly in love with her boss and whose only pleasure in life was seeing him at the office although she knew he was happily married and old enough to be her father. At your age, replies sprightly nonagenarian Madge, at your age you can make a complete break with this infatuation which as you know yourself is hopeless and can only lead to unhappiness. Let's face it, despair cannot last for ever and even if you were decidedly miserable for two years after the break, well you'd still only be twenty one.

That's right ducky. Look for new interests among the activities of your friends, or if all else fails buy a candle. Life is rich and countless solutions are at hand. The county river authority require a supply of chestnut bat faggots, stumps and poles. Rain shatters soccer scene. Council blunder decision. Ashamed. Ah, if people had only half the vitality of their evening paper how easy life would

be. She has torn off half the centre sheet and wiped the knife on it. The paper lies on the table with a greasy crease across it. It is strange that with her this action appears isolated, unconnected, a random instance of a slatternly mind, whereas with you it would have been lost at once in the flurry of the meal you were making. I see her only in brief exposures separated by the iron shutter that is my sense of you, and her every gesture appears grotesque and contorted, lacking all rhythm and reason, features without a face. I cannot realize her. I must watch the paper, perhaps she's been writing to the woman about this dishy but dishpassionate bloke she's arse over tit in love with though she knows that he's happily married to his past and old enough to be his father.

Our life now folded up and went into hibernation, the pulse rate dropped to the minimum required to crawl from the bed to the kitchen to the lavatory and back to bed. If only I knew a little of how you saw it all, see it, but then I never troubled to enquire and now it is too late. To me the whole long months we spent in that place seem only a dreary prelude to that moment when, for a brief fortnight, we meshed again and acted in earnest. And even now I don't know which was the more vile, that sterile daze or the vicious finale.

To start with I spent the day over at my own place, perched above the park, watching the ducks squawking and

foraging through the big pond with its axle of rhododendrons, women sitting on benches gazing after their kids as they crawled through ambush and undergrowth and thinking how having babies is one thing and bringing them up quite another, old men swinging sticks and talking to themselves in the bitter winter dusk. I ate beans on toast and saw the three streetlamps defining the crescent appear in the gloom. And then later in the chilly bare room I would gradually become aware that for some time past my thoughts had been concerned with their apparent object, the view outside and in, but were aimed over the town at you. I had exhausted the possibilities of solitude. I picked up my coat and scarf and locked the door behind me. And even then, rather as a memory of those dead first weeks than as a warning, but even then I realized sharply just what that side of my life that was you meant, and what unspeakable mental immurement must result from exhausting the echoes of oneself and having nothing to do but go on listening.

The bus took around half an hour before dropping me at a stop near a post box, the only unrepeated feature on that long and perfectly straight road flanked with thin trees and dipping slightly, so that one could not make out where it ended. It was cold and dark and always slightly foggy on those windless evenings. I walked along a little and turned off down the street that ran straight down to the sea, but a sea invisible, flat and featureless as the

land, kept tidily shut away behind a low breakwater topped by the promenade. Counting street lamps, the house I often mistook and entered one strange to me, the house with its pointless rosebushes in the front and red and white tiled hall with cracks so intricate as to form themselves a pattern of sorts. The door of the living room, a classic misnomer, half panelled with heavy Victorian stained glass ribbed with lead. And inside, oh as sure as fate, our flatmates, he reading, she cooking. Both equally tall and painfully thin, with the etiolated appearance of stretched rubber. While I only came for the night I did not take them very seriously, with their weird looks and offhand manner. Besides, neither of us were very interested in flatmates as people. We chose our friends, carefully. The woman told me you were in the bedroom, and so you were, pleased to see me for the same sweet reasons I was to see you I expect, as a pleasant change from the rest of the day. Neither of us seemed to realise how very different a thing this was to the unobtrusive obsession we had used to have for each other. We had simply passed without noticing to another way of being together. The room was really too small to hold both of us if either wanted to work, you had to go out to the front room where there was a table, and where the pussies would be eating or talking or being. So small a thing as not having a table in the room.

You came to have a look at my place, but it was no possibility. Small and intensely cold, for I who need the cold to keep my brain awake had no heater, and with only a feeble little electric cooker which ate shillings as a bear fish you soon stopped thinking of that way out. Yet I remember one incident from the few times you came to see me there, early on. It was in the afternoon. We tried to christen the room by making love in it, on the hard lumpy mattress. And then I could not find a towel for you to wipe yourself with and had to give you the dishcloth. We dressed quickly, for it was cold, and tried to settle to the quiet of having made love. But it was too harsh, the room, our actions stood out strangely against the walls undisguised by use, sheer white. You put down the book you had brought and came over to me where I sat, staring out at the pruned down agony of the trees. You put on your brown woollen coat with the high collar that came up to your ears and said you were going back. I told you I'd stay and come over at the usual time. And then I took hold of your furze shoulders and pulling you, who responded to the familiar tug, kissed your thin mouth and cold smooth cheek. And I remember the peculiar surplus of emotion in your eyes as perhaps in mine, which I thought only a sudden softness of love come out for no reason. But now it seems to me that that moment was different in kind from all we had known, that what touched us then was something we had never felt before and were troubled by without knowing, a moment of regret. And al-

though it was all blown away in the briskness of your parting words, something about what you were getting for supper, yet as I heard your footsteps on the stairs and heard the front door shut I thought of you with sadness, though I had no idea why, and remembered once you had left my boarding room after a few words from me had brought you near to tears, and how I had been unable to stay with the thought of your bursting face walking lonely up the street and had run after you and found you at home, quietly ironing a blouse. And again I had that sudden urge to run quickly and join you, stay with you, before it was too late. Too late for what? I would be seeing you in a couple of hours, you had not been sad or insulted. Why this absurd fear, this need to keep you in sight? I got up, switched on the light and thought no more about it.

And so the long months to Christmas dragged by. After September my goal has always been Christmas, with its promise of a new year and the young months with their names full of open, clear sheets to be covered where October and November are torn and crumpled pieces of botch work, foul papers from drafts made earlier in the year. A stupid myth but there it is. After all, we met in November but nothing happened until January. Gradually I went back less and less to my room over town. It had little to offer except privacy, and was a long and expensive journey away morning and night. As the holidays approached my inertia got the

better of me and I took to staying the day in your room, usually in bed. As you were away all day at the library, working for your coming examinations, this did not mean we saw a great deal more of each other. What it meant was that I saw a great deal more of our neighbours, who were slowly and very surely getting on my wick. No doubt it was simply living at such close quarters that brought my irritation to the boil, for it came to have much the same effect on we two, who had chosen to be together. But even a bite can madden if there is nothing to do but sit and scratch it. And although you got on quite well with the girl at first, I could not stomach either of them at sight. It literally put me off my food to look at them, their emaciated bodies and white sickly skin. I remember one night I was feeling queasy I brought up the vomit just by imagining them taking a bath together, a pastime they indulged in fairly regularly. So, they were disgusting to look at and lean minded with it, and there were two of them, making up more than the sum of their individual charms, yet you see worse on the top deck of the bus every day. What gave them an almost magic power over us was the fact that we could not evade them, yet they had room enough never to cross us had they wished. Not only was their bedroom twice the size of ours and quite possible to live in, but they had also heard that the landlady was letting another room in the house, and snapped it up, a dry airy room in the old part of the building, facing

the street. Yet in spite of all this they contrived to spend most of their time in the communal living room, ostensibly watching television, thus driving us either to remain cooped up in our broom cupboard or to share their dour company, for even when we did venture out they made us feel we were intruding. These grossly unequal desserts were spirit in the sores we had from the foul place anyway. To think, as we did think many many times, that they had the run of two rooms each larger than ours, and one of which we could have had ourselves had we heard about it. I could have taken it and left the other, a perfect arrangement. Except that no one had thought to tell us. That they should have the best bedroom was bad enough, but to rent another room in the house and then occupy the living room every evening!

How petty all this would sound to people who have never had to share rooms and think love is love wherever it is lived. And perhaps it is, perhaps we were petty lovers and our love a slight and shallow affair, judged by those standards. I often thought so at the time, just as since I have come to think of it as a uniquely potent amalgam of the best and worst in both of us. But I do not really believe it was these chance combinations of wretchedness that broke us up. What they did was to take us at the very moment when we most needed to grow and change, and love cannot stand still. Anyway I have no interest in inquests when your evidence is lost. I only want to confess my part

in all this, by a written statement signed in the presence of my memories. You can hardly care about it any longer anyway, and place and the malevolent season keep their own counsel as always.

We were back with the tight of the previous winter, resisting again, but in place of that vague insecurity and resentment our grievances were sharply defined and brought home to us at each instant. Our world of two was constantly blundering myopically into paltry irritations of every kind, in themselves nothing but forming a power which was getting at us, was out to get us. You wanted to wash your hands, but the pussies were in the bathroom. We wanted peace to work, they had the television blaring in the front room or were mumbling at one another in the kitchen. We would have liked a change of wall, but not necessarily their company with it. You were ready to cook dinner, they were already doing so. All tiny matters, but constant, a grit in the shoe that eventually draws the mind from its reason for walking. You dived under the bedclothes head first and lay with your feet flapping on the pillow, repeating fuck fuck fuck in the muffled bed. There was no way out. It was impossible to arrange a compatible scheme with these people who resented our being there in the first place. To get anything for ourselves was to shout and keep shouting, which wore us out until we cared no longer, wanting only quiet and

sleep. It was this sense of having constantly to fight the creeping intrusions on our real life that made us sick and tired, as in a dream when some strand of sanity knows that all this is absurd and impossible, but it goes on, and on.

We used all our considerable arsenal of wit in our attempts to discharge these feelings of outrage and contempt for the ugly and successful pair. They spoke to each other in long heated whispers that suddenly touched their chords and became short howls, at once quietened. At moments of particular emotion they called each other Puss, a pet name no more mawkish than many of ours, but which came to sum for us everything we loathed in them, their crassness and sentimentality, their selfishness and selfsufficiency. I suppose no one likes living at close quarters with people who so resemble themselves. At any rate we took great delight in shortening their sweeting by one letter, and I should have liked to have seen their faces if they had opened our door during one of their passionate dialogues in the kitchen and beheld us sitting on the bed mouthing Pus Pus to the accompaniment of every slobbery grimace and obscene gesture we could invent.

These are the good memories, and there should have been no others, this insolence of our surroundings might still have brought out our good and bad in extreme and left us unscarred. We had sat tight often enough before, waiting for the sun. But by now there were other forces at work,

the battering we had taken abroad had shaken the whole structure, blocking old channels and opening new along which much of our festering energy was directed away from the game of securing our position as two against the rest and into quite personal dreams of breaking out, with the other seen as part of the present prison, a product of the old order. At least I suppose it was so for you too. I cannot go on qualifying my ignorance, it is time to make a few assertions. Whether you because I or I more than you wished for another face and so missed a whole dimension in the face we saw each day, robbing each day of the next, each word of its resonance until our talk only cracked the air and the subtle harmonies of your voice wore thin as that of a chanting child, why the threads and skeins of love that underlay all we did were broken and shrivelled like burnt plastic I don't know, I can't say. I am no analyst of love, an alchemist rather. Nor is this a whodunnit of the heart. We all know who did it, there are no surprises in store, I have nothing up my sleeve but words. The only question is what exactly was done, and why, why? And though I have spent and will spend many hours wondering how far my dissatisfaction became yours and by reflection grew, it is not really material. This is my story, and I'm stuck to it.

Of course the gradual hardening of the space between us, this is only a metaphor. We did not live our lives as an inevitable process of separation leading to a

point but simply got on with it, and if we seemed more taciturn and selfish than before, a little more like a middle aged married couple, then we blamed the place, looked forward to bed, made some coffee, closed our eyes and breathed out, scratched an itchy pimple, smiled. We had never been particularly demonstrative and a stranger coming by chance to our room would have made little of us. We passed our time either in silence or fragmented conversation interspersed with the peculiar spectral jokes we found funny and those vaudeville routines that our serious talk was at any moment liable to swing into and disintegrate. We had too little faith in the importance of holding views on things to air them for long without mockery, and it was this constant imminence of ridicule that made our talk light and flexible.

And this is a whole chapter of my sick longing for you, when I try and talk to other women and find myself suddenly alone, while she touches her hair and agrees without hearing. I just cannot adapt myself to these lumbering conversations *alla tedesca* with their grinding changes of gear. I disappear and materialize behind her head, turn a somersault and pull out the light socket, explode in several directions condensing in a brief crystal of sense which promptly vanishes as I laugh the whole thing away. And her face! Her earnest expression as, catching up with some point I made half an hour ago, she repeats it word for word like

someone reading a foreign language, subtly misinterprets the whole thing and then agrees with me. You've got to be sincere, she tells me, and say what you really think. How can I tell her that I never really think? She has the sort of mind whose ideas could be entered as distinguishing marks on her passport. And when I remember you, throwing in a nonsense notion to confuse things, or seriously trying to bring out some lurking word while doodling on the work you were doing, or saying in mock stubbornness well it says so in the book, or breaking up an argument you could not follow with frenzied scalp scratching and a frown of parody puzzlement suddenly put aside as you caught a real thought by the tail and brought it out with a clear brevity that left me gaping, or abandoned the whole subject with a stamp of your foot, who cares it's all a load of old crap anyway, and went hunting for your nail varnish, during the peaceful application of which you would suddenly resume the conversation, which had all become clear in another key.

This was the side of our life which at once richened and splintered from the rest under pressure. When we were able to realize our own thing this was it and it was good, but far more often the weight of the world, personified by our flat hates, was too great for our vaporous chat to bear and we sat in dour silence and locked heads. How well I remember that feeling of utter helplessness, sitting slumped

on the bed, fingering again and again the same set of stupid useless dead alternatives, go out to the front room, go for a walk, get a bus into town. And in the evenings when at last sleep time came round and we heard the pussies packing up in the front room and strolling through to the bedroom they had not seen since the morning, perhaps stopping to take a long splashy bath behind our heads, then farting and shitting and pissing and sponging and brushing in the bathroom at our feet, and finally, skin clean and bladders empty, retiring to bed, there to thump the bedstead on the wall beside us in spasmodic bouts of solemn sex. While we lay too exhausted even to undress, dully suffering others to live.

And although I remember one night when as we made love you suddenly started to pant rhythmically and drool poosie oh pussy wussy puss puss miaow, and I laughed so much I came at once and we lay in each other's arms purring like giant cats and shaking with laughter and love, though I remember that I also remember the nights when I found you half asleep when I finally made up my mind for bed, and you shivered and threw off the hand I touched you with, curling up into yourself and leaving me only your cold arse to press against.

And so, the necessary amount of time having passed, we travelled home for the Christmas holidays, back to the land where half my thoughts were kept, locked up in those quiet streets and the person of that strange gawky girl who touched my life only occasionally, but at its source. We

took a train up north to the harbour station, where the lamps strung on wires were bucking in the near gale off the sea. It was very cold, but in spite of being dressed for an evening at the theatre we rejected the beery squalor of the steerage saloon for the clean and bitter deck where we finally hollowed out a space in a stack of deckchairs and fell into a cramped and broken sleep with the tarpaulin over us and the wind streaming through the slatted heap. We might easily have died from exposure, but our lack of proper clothing and refusal to join the queasy masses inside in the warm neatly exemplify that mixture of arrogance and ineptitude that we were.

You stayed home just long enough to give us a serious scare when your period was overdue sixteen days, and then returned to town, both to work and to carry out a little strategic manoeuvre we had decided upon. After a fortnight of waiting for you to bleed I for one was sure we had lost, and in a few days went rapidly through all the stock reactions from fear to pride. I had just convinced myself that the only viable approach to life was to immerse oneself in it by having babies and mortgages and suffering the joys and sorrows of common humanity when you told me you had gone up the pole, and I breathed deeply and put these sentiments back in the icebox. And so I remained, passive to the sure sense of pattern which operated upon my life in that country. I willed nothing, but with a perfect rhythm of their own events unfolded into me, using me as a ground

on which to realize themselves. Again I met the girl, by a sequence of chances that could have happened nowhere else. At a party one evening, she coming down the stairs and I going to go up, we suddenly put our arms about each other and kissed, on a level, for she was exactly a stair shorter than me. Then broke and looked at each other, asking what had happened and what to do with it now. Still without speaking we went out into the blustery night, clouds dusting down the bare sky, went for a walk down the deserted street where every wall was a seam of the night, each step taken against the grain of time felt on the face, inside a head that was the heart of the night sounding with each step. We spoke few words, then or ever, for it seemed that speech was too vague a way to say anything, we were afraid of its jarring associations with the reality we had left only a little way behind us, at the street corner.

She was unremarkable to look at, though her face had a certain butterfly beauty that would soon harden and set in a common mould. But her manner, which in company she disliked was the most horribly gauche I have ever seen, became when she eased graceful with an unstudied originality that was almost a physical attribute, a breathless expression of herself before her face turned plain and made such expression ridiculous. She acted in relief.

We stood and leaned on the parapet of the railway bridge, touching each other but not this miraculous ambiguity

we were afraid of allowing to resolve into any familiar shape. And it was this fear of ourselves which was tangible, which sealed the originality of the moment with a token we could feel and know to be true. Then we kissed again, and I noted with surprise that the feel of her mouth rather disgusted me. We walked back to the party and shortly after she left.

We were spared the temptation of interfering with this given and unspeakable sense of sympathy. Both then and a year later, when the sequence was repeated blow by blow, we had too short a time together to spoil it or the promise of a future which never arrived, as though we had exhausted its possibilities in the letters we exchanged between.

We met only once more that holiday, thanks to the return ticket I had in my wallet. I went up to her house for that evening, my last. Already I could feel the tension seeking a resting place, we talked nervously and spent much of the time listening to records and staring at the clock for the hour the ship would leave. And if we could we would have killed the very thing we fed on, the fact of separation. For it seemed then we could have spent our lives together, slowly exploring each other and this common blood group we had found. Certainly we could never have resisted the desire to try, without the intervention of blind fact. This is what made the affair unique, that the simple contingency of

coming and going forced us to sublimate our designs in imagination, to live vicariously, which was the true and only reality of our live. We said goodbye, and already the words were past, spoken by another. We lived with every fibre and nerve in us prickling, and yet observed ourselves living with the passionate disinterest with which one studies the photograph of an old forgotten love. I caught the bus that wheeled me down the wide and lighted streets to the docks, my skull full of becoming.

A change of trains at a windswept junction and I was back again, the following noon, but back from what, back to what? A holiday romance, like a dream, back to reality. I eyed the crowds drifting about the streets, the occasional handmade specimens pressing their way through, anxious to demonstrate their marked and passing minutes, the solid facades of houses wormeaten with rooms changing hands by the month. Nobody lives in this town. It is a place to visit, act out some selected scene and leave, an illusion of community sustained only by a ceaseless detonation of happening as the passing crowds drop in and drop out, popping like bubbles in the rarefied absurdity of a town which exists only as a backdrop exists, an unfocused haze that would be conspicuous in its absence.

I stepped experimentally into a striking replica of a bus, and felt a wild desire to laugh as the driver got in and we started to move. It was as if the bird in the

painted sky had flown out into the theatre, squawking and alive. I inspected the view outside with amazement. They had really gone to great trouble. That fat and lardy mother with her sticky mouthed brat, how perfectly they had captured the years of vulgarity which had broken the lines of the once attractive girl one could still extrapolate from the slum of her body. And the hard young women cleaving the street in secure possession of their beauty, laboriously unaware of themselves. Indeed it was only when I recalled to mind the image of the night before, its subtlety and restraint, the inexpressible statement of her eyes as I turned to go, not sorrow and not love, nor despair nor nostalgia but a simplicity which expressed nothing and meant everything, name every emotion you can imagine and subtract them from the total experience, her eyes held what is left, which is simply everything, only when I summoned up that view did I realize how crude and forced was all this swollen show. And once noticed it was obvious, the fractional overemphasis, the embarrassing insistence on reality, the colours too bright and various, the noises slightly too complex, the crowd scenes too busy and true to life, the total absence of control. All the people played their parts well enough, but it was not their show, one could see they were only extras trying to please. It was a parody of reality, with all the trimmings but nowhere the intention, the sensed direction that would bring these details out of overstatement and into perspective. I felt a soaring free-

dom, a power in my willless progression where these clowns set foot after heavy foot in a laborious attempt to prove that they were really walking.

And much becomes clear at this nexus, where again I felt my relation to the town define itself. In those early days after leaving your bed in the morning I had felt for the first time that I fitted with no overlap into my surroundings, that I was an object among objects, a man among men. But now it was precisely my distinction that defined me, not my participation. I felt no real arrogance or superiority, one does not feel proud not being a dog or despise dogs for not being human. These puppets around me were amusing or disgusting as parodies of humanity, but that humanity was my own secret and they were no more trying to emulate it than a barking dog is trying to speak. The distinction was simply that I was living tuned to the wavelength on which the faint signals of my personality emanated from their mysterious source. I was playing my own game at last.

How should I face you, knowing what I knew now? For this is where the plot gets unbearably tangled, involving such huge slices of myself, each one precluding the other, that I wonder if I can even rough them out, let alone preserve that delicate balance and relation without which it will all resolve into the readymade problems of psychology. In my life there were now two lives, two loves. You, the

creature I lived with and loved as a human being with all the wealth and confusion I have been trying to transcribe, to write off, here. And she, that awkward point of departure for my trips into another kind of life, but whose face I could not visualize except as expression and whose manner was that of the young coffeebar mystic she was, as a person. How pleasant and tidy it would be simply to dismiss one of you here and now, with a phrase picked from a plump novel. I soon came to see that my love for you was an affection of the flesh, my spirit cried to you in vain. Or, My love for her was the love of an ageing romantic for his youth, of a disillusioned idealist for the last blossom. left unplucked in the wilderness of his mind. Oh aye. Cranmer was not noble but thick, we would all willingly thrust our hand into the flames if we knew with his blind faith which it was had offended.

As it was I modulated from the exaltation I felt with, or rather through her, to the warmth I felt with you, without noticing. For we have been in the bus all this time, and as I got out and found myself again in the wide midday street my storm of self subsided and the world slid back into focus, and though I now had myself in my sights too, I knew I could never communicate this. From the outside personality means character and will tolerate a wide range of behaviour, but from within it is simply a very distinct sense of having ground underfoot. How often I had been

amazed that no one had remarked my wild vertigo as that ground veered and pitched, how they accepted me as the same person, who had just exhausted a whole repertoire of disguises before their eyes. But the subtle adjustments of private self hardly make flicker the gross gauge of the public persona, and I knew that all my vast emotion at having come home to myself would never register on anyone else. You would see me the same, and it was as that generally similar person that I was going to have to live with you.

We had arranged a coup to settle accounts with our dumb friends. Having returned a week before them you had cleared all their belongings out of the big bedroom and into ours, installing us in the larger room and explaining politely when they arrived that as we payed half the rent we expected a fair share of the space, and as they had another room in the house they could not possibly object. I gleefully inspected our new refuge, its size and security. Now at least they could no longer get at us from all sides, we had a wall to our backs. You too were much happier, I saw at once, sorting your clothes through the big cupboards, sprawling bottles of makeup and books and paper all over the dresser, luxuriating in burning questions such as whether to stack your shoes over here or over there, breaking up the two beds from the centre of the room to give us space to pace, for we were used to sleeping in a single bed and anyway the sheets wouldn't really stretch over two, damp

as they were. We went out to dinner, came back and spent half the night screwing away in our new couch of lust with its funny pink wollen sheets and matching counterpane. We were happier that day than for many months, and on the strength of it I gave up my escape hatch on the other side of town. It was as if we had turned some corner and many things had clarified. I think now it was simply that the turbulence of warm and cold had subsided during the holiday. We had at last grown accustomed to not leaning on each other so much, to a distance which made our life together easier by as much as it destroyed its meaning. We agreed tacitly not to care so much.

It was obvious how this had occurred in my case, of you I know nothing. But perhaps after all it was only your growing realization that the things you really wanted were not those I had to offer, as with me, except that your needs were more immediate and infinitely more available. At any rate, we both figured our very different lacks in the same way, as a vague hankering for foreign countries. This had always been a theme of ours, tied in with clumsy invective against our present circumstances. But as with the sight of our future, for which it was a metaphor, this interest in abroad had been infected by our actual experience of it, over the summer. Our total failure to coalesce then had forced both of us to adjust our image of this mecca. In

practice it had not worked, so we were wrong, either about ourselves or about each other. And faced with a choice between our ideals and a partner whose appeal had always been a little too immediate to fit easily into them, we sacrificed each other without a qualm. However good our life together was then we had to assume the future would be better, but without the other, who had failed to make it so in practice. This transference of hope to a future split from our present life made that life infinitely easier, since we no longer expected anything from it. It was a pastime, we could relax. There was no longer anything to lose, or win.

And so we spent the long January evenings leafing through folders and looking at maps. And although we never actually discussed the matter, it was somehow assumed that we would not be going to the same place. And yet how much of this was still me. After you left, after the letters had sunk in I found myself reeling around in huge fields of possibility I had never seen before. With all these doubts and ambiguities it becomes easy to mess everything up, to ascribe to you motives I only considered then, which I quite possibly called up to still the pain of losing you by devaluation of your memory.

It is safest to stick to the memories of the moment. Perhaps they too lie, but I think such lies as one accepts

at the time are always more intimate exemplars of reality than any conclusion after the event, for they command a sense of the truth if only the better to conceal it. And if there is one picture remains of all that time, it is of your sweet vague face poised on a balance where a single word from me might have swung you. For though you struck out your grand plans with the calm confidence of someone seeing clear, I must not now fall for the trick that fooled me then, must not now attribute to you a brand of harsh dealing with those we love that is mine, not yours, you who never in all that time so much as lifted a finger to defend or revenge yourself when I picked up other girls at parties or, as once, insulted you viciously in the company of your friends. When I only think. If a man has no fixed point he can call himself, if he can change utterly from mood to mood and call this true and then abuse it, if he acts only with reference to his heaving self until everything he sees he sees only as an aspect of that self, then what has a soft and vulnerable creature like you to do with such a spastic man? You are well away, for though I cannot imagine a worse thing than what I did to you, I know that if there is I would have done it. Leave me to the people who only play at living, as I do, for we have ways and means of healing the wounds we get. But you, you who gave everything you had, sunk firmly in the moving body of time, you deserve better than that, and

I hope, as I have never hoped for another before, I hope and wish that you will get it.

Oh you would have gone with me then, no doubt of it, but it was I, I was the one that spoke I for we, throwing you from me like an old ring, intoxicated with the unexplored possibilities of the life I had glimpsed over Christmas. And so you took the lead I gave you, and we discussed in an objective way where we each wanted to go, and why, and compared notes like the civilized people we were.

One morning a letter arrived for me, the shock of seeing my name in the unfamiliar handwriting and purple ink I knew could only belong to one person. Everything that had been circling loose in my head was there, defined on paper in the shift my name underwent simply because she had written it. By luck it arrived with the second post, while you were out, and I at once realized that I would keep this whole side of my life away from you. Which surprised me, for one of the few ways our actions matched our talk was in an openness over other friendships, simply because we assumed they would be no more. Occasionally you would tell me that one of your admirers had asked you out to eat or to the cinema, was that all right? And the question meant only, I haven't forgotten anything else I'm supposed to be doing have I? We both believed that what we shared was too rare a sympathy to be broken by anything but an internal dis-

affection with the sympathy itself. We did not fear variety of experience, for we knew only a change of heart could break us up, and there was nothing we could do about that. Of course you could go out with your lovers, in fact I was rather relieved since it eased me of the obligation to take you out myself, and I was lazy.

But standing there in the cracked and silent hall, holding my letter, it occurred to me spontaneously that this was another matter. It involved, in other words, the change of heart we could do nothing about. But it was not working out in quite the clear cut fashion I had expected, this and therefore not that. In fact, of course, I was temperamentally unfitted for either or, wishing really all the doors to be open for ever, never having the courage of my fickle moods. So I resolved to send her a poste restante and keep the letters among my other papers, a hiding place so obvious there was a good chance of you never finding them, and I do not know to this day if you ever did, and if so what you made of them.

They were my first contact with her as a personality, for everything we had hesitated to attempt in shaky conversation we poured out in the tight rhetoric of our letters. And this is precisely the difference, the line of demarcation in my head between you and she. For with you it was the live twitching wire of speech that carried our words, our letters were cold, clumsy and silent. But with her I

achieved on paper a depth and complexity of understanding that I would not have thought possible. Only on paper of course, but why the less actual for that? She wrote them usually at school, in the stale afternoons of the library, skimming the bits and pieces of herself left floating after her apparent week had been lived. I destroyed them all later, and now I wish I had kept at least one, to put down a few sentences of the limpid and coloured prose that lived before my eyes as an oil slick lives on water. Hesitant, then sure, strident, a few trivialities of her life sharing a sentence with a breathless apprehension of that hollowness at the heart of our every perception, at once our despair and unspeakable hope. Not just a few hard ideas stuck in a lumpy letter, but the very weave and fabric of a life I knew by heart, its contingencies suddenly spilling their cargo of emptiness and possibility, only to clam up tight and reassert themselves with a smug solidity. At times I thought it was only a stupid ingrained belief in average reality which prevented me reading those lines before I saw them, from calling out aloud to that part of me, you, them, it, that had lodged in a strange skull. All this sense of a comprehension greater than I had ever dared hope, which I dismissed in others as sentimentality, all this was mine, neatly summed up in her final words. Love from Me.

My head was churning as whole volumes of assumptions yelled out all at once, trying desperately to talk their way

out of this dilemma, this irrefutable fact of a letter which disproved everything they stood for. The wallpaper and furniture quailed visibly as I looked around to see how it was taking this deathblow to all its ridiculous pretensions. I debated with myself whether or not to laugh satanically and have the world disappear, but decided I might need it later. Instead I got up, fetched a sheet of paper and started to write in the name of another human being those things which I kept locked up in the vaults of my mind, and which emerged on to the page white and blinking, with a ridiculous and touching uncertainty, not really believing that their existence could be admitted like this.

And when you came home, what difference? Perhaps I was a little cooler, a little more distant, listened with rather less attention to your account of the day, your intense and frustrated anger at some setback, with the vicious jerky gestures you used to accent it, controlled, as if you could not afford to let yourself go or you would wreck the place. Perhaps my embarrassed unconcern was a little more trying than usual, but nothing remarkable. I had been far less sympathetic, even openly hostile to you in the past, simply because my bus was packed with obese women with dogs. And yet now my very prospect of the world had turned around, and there was nothing to show.

Nothing to show, no change, business as usual. As usual our life opened out very slightly with the year tending

towards spring. The long dark months I had passed only by seeing as little as possible of the daylight, the stale grey light that made the streets colder than the cold they were. I took to sleeping until two or three, which left just a few hours of dusk before it was only our room that mattered, where we sat grimly over the heater and were trampled to death by the nuzzling pussies. But as the days grew larger and milder I began to take rather more interest in, so to speak, life. Secure in the knowledge of our new and impregnable room I felt able to venture out occasionally, to walk up the street to the slab of shops on the other side of the arterial road and buy a paper, a loaf. Slowly the district opened out to me, a concrete flower. It is so very different from the rest of the town, for it is the part where people come to die. From all over the country they come, to this last resort where the clean air and congenial company may allow them another few years of funfilled existence. This gives a peculiar flavour to those barren streets, a flavour I did not notice for a long time. It is simply that everywhere you look the people you see are dying. There are a few younger ones, shop assistants, secretaries, policemen. But in general what one remembers without consciousness are the tiny groups of crones clustered at the street corners and house gates, passing on the latest nature cures as well as the list of mutual acquaintances who have taken the last and most efficacious of these, congratulating each

other without ever actually saying so on having survived since the last meeting. And the old women walking in a cage of aluminium, with such appalling and hopeless slowness that one wondered what destination on earth could be close enough for them to reach by nightfall, or lure enough to have them try. The old gents who have kept up appearances and stride along the pitiless avenues of plasterboard dosshouses, neat and shining, a tribute to their corsets. And the dreadfully definitive klaxon of the ambulance tracing a web through all the streets around, in February, when they go like netted fish.

But however depressing it all was, and kept me tired and listless, there was now, as there had not been the previous year, a stock it could not rot. How much richer this account would be if you were relating it. For myself apart is a poverty of experience in these final months, when I was already taking you for granted. To be sure we went for walks and Sunday jaunts, but where are you? Lost between one summer and the next, when I was again forced to notice you, by the strange new context of your being, only at the last do you come whole to my eyes again, with a shocking reality. But in between you slipped along with the rest of my surroundings into an always tangential haze, a second suit of clothes to keep my skin from skin. So now I will never know how it affected you, that gradual realization that we had lost each other. If you did realize. You never seemed curious to find out what

was happening and why, indeed it was your lack of reaction which allowed the dreamy aimlessness of our life to continue, the acceptance of a lull between us as we withdrew all energy from the common circuit and diverted it to our personal ends. I cannot imagine what I should have done if one evening you had come out with the fact we had assumed without overtly admitting, perhaps a movie plum, what's happening to us darling? Probably the movie reply, I don't know baby I just don't know. But whatever it is, it's alive. Let's try and have a laugh for once, it's not a hilarious story and if life is a joke it's a shaggy dog joke, but the details can usually be relied upon for a giggle. If I could only believe in some kind of superhuman understanding, where we could slough off the consequences of our actions and laugh together at the layers of deception and parody we waded through. I want so much to be able to laugh. But, always but, we know, we who have seen the film, that there is a nasty bit coming very soon now, when I broke the context of our laughter and our tears, broke up the concept of us and made laughter and every other shared reaction impotent. What really hurts me is this simple division, that we will never again see the same sky, hear the same word at the same moment. The world is different now that we no longer perceive it as lovers, is poorer. For one and one makes two, creates it, and that creation I destroyed.

But there is one very easy reason why everything

continued without seeming to change. We still slept together. It is just such a simple factor that one forgets completely in looking back, forgets not the fact but what it was. The mind remembers, the mind considers, the mind decides. The mind takes over, and misses entirely the great tonic to which all passing moods were keyed. It chops with its pen. One had, of course, other diversions, making love and so on, one was, after all, in the final analysis, human. One remembers that there was physical love, but how easy to forget just what that meant, that cote on which we homed each night like scattered pigeons, that all the varied cramps and itches of the day could be dissolved in a solution unknown to the wisdom of the mind, I mean the sheet muscles of a leg, the lighter skin uncovered, a breast's constantly mobile geometry, the taut curls of hair felt on the petalled foreskin, the pouting cunt.

And yet this is the cord binding up all our time together, the one thing that never soured on us, the one aspect of our love that only grew richer with time. Whether we were close as friends or distant as relatives, in bed we always enjoyed ourselves with the same delight in each other, and it was surely this more than anything which gave us the illusion of continuity. The glib people who repeat that lust is nothing without love are those who have never enjoyed either. Love is a grand piano of emotion and only virtuosi can hope to make much sense of

its complex power, but lust is as clear as a flute tune, in bed we can all play scales. What is so wonderful about this is that it is the only side of our love for which I need feel no guilt, no regret. For whatever else has gone that was unique, I'm not egotist enough to believe that our love making is part of it. There we are both dispensable, for our lust for each other was always a thing separate, and never did either of us perpetrate the dreary artificiality of literary lovers who cannot bear to be touched when they are offended, or feel it simply isn't right to lie with somebody if they have had an argument. Fuck that. I knew when I was on to a good thing and you knew when you were under one, and we did not let our maundering sensibilities get in our way. And yet even here the sickness creeps in, for I wonder if I will ever again find a lover who does not take herself too seriously to deny herself a good shag simply because the petty person wants to stand on her pride. It was only possible because we did not value ourselves very highly either as individuals or as a couple. Why then should I take us so seriously now? Because I have not your irreverant mind to help laugh me out of it or your body to help me forget, and because of why I have not. We did not value our love, which does not mean it was valueless, only that I at least did not know its value; half of which consisted precisely in this ignorance.

Yet what can I say about it, our bed time? It was

not unique, we had no favourite little perversion to spice up a story. How can I describe your penny breasts without making you into a myth or a monstrosity? You will have found lovers more exciting than me. It was simply a very good thing we shared, which got better, since we were neither of us more than amateurs and our pleasure in each other increased in inverse proportion to our interest. One of the first things we notice about making love was that it abolished time. Coupled up we became a machine for splitting the minutes apart, forcing time to destroy itself and convert its gross duration into experience. How often we rose painfully from the drowsy drunkenness of love and stared incredulous at the clock, as if some law of the universe had been disproved, whole hours vanishing in the space of a few minutes.

Meanwhile the purple letters still pointed my week. The clerk in the local post office never really grew reconciled to the idea, and each Monday as I went in to collect these cuttings of a week wrapped up on Friday night he first of all lowered his eyes as I opened the door, tipping its bell, as if young people should be treated as a social indiscretion, then grudgingly searched for the envelope I could already see on the rack behind him, repeating my name and staring at the letter, and finally looked me steadily in the eyes as he dropped the thing on the counter, ignoring my open hand, daring me to claim this matter unfit to appear at a public address. And I hope it

gave him wet dreams for a week.

The high peak of my days, apart from bed, were those mornings, any morning but especially Monday. Breakfast of eggs and coffee and a smooth newspaper, the empty house and eternally hopeful feeling of starting the day, even if it was eleven o'clock and all quiet. It was then I sat trembling, the unopened letter thick with possibility beside my plate, reading the paper and giving a little easy form to my flabby life by refusing to insert my fingernail into that inviting gap between the flap and back of the envelope until I had finished eating. Picking up the letter I passed through the bathway convertible passageroom into the bedroom converted lounge, and lounged there in the huge maternal armchair, ripping open the envelope and vanishing into thin air for ten minutes or more.

I was always apprehensive of those letters. They were to me oracles, from a source unpredictable and unreachable. They had given me a lift greater than any I had ever known, it was reasonable to suppose they could very easily achieve the opposite. But, as if art were really by its nature consolatory, they never did. It needed life for that, and I might have taken the hint one of those evenings, when, stuffed to the pores with secreted liquor I could never disclose to you or anyone else, I took all your sixpences, told you I was going to phone my parents, and went off down the cast iron street to the

lighted box at the corner, my palms sticky as if I were going to commit a crime.

I dialled her number, the impossibly remote bell rang, as in a dream she answered at once. And I knew in that moment that it was all a terrible mistake, that there was nothing I could say that would not sound stagey and absurd. In the event she did not even seem surprised to hear me, part of her cool act no doubt. I stuttered hullo. How was she. All right. Pause. And you? Oh fine, fine. Pause. I got your letter. Good. Pause. I just wanted to hear your voice, you see. Yes. Well here I am. Pause. Yes, I know you are. Long pause. Was that all? Yes. No. Well, it'll have to do. Pause. Well, bye bye. So long. Pause. Keep writing. Click.

I walked home, slowly. But then I have never been much good on the telephone, a man of my sensibility cannot converse with a void voice, in the flesh it will be different. Your gentle face peered up as I shut the door, at once deserting the book for me. Yes I got through. They are very well and send their love.

Your face in bed. I never got used to that rictus of passion, contorted as though I were doing you some terrible injury while you lay silent. Until after flickered hours of love we came into that land without division, where feeling only feels and does not have to care. And it was then, in that twilight of excitement compounded of dull

pain and pleasure both, it was then that we made our closest approach to each other. Lying on you and loving you slowly, my hands rubbing your breasts slippery with sweat, the nipples soft, staring at your face, your tidy hair damp and ragged, skin flushed and your shallow alarmed eyes staring back at me, both of us confronting in silence the turmoil churning up the centre of our bodies, speaking no message but watching and agreeing to be watched. Is it not love simply to be able to gaze at someone's face for a long time, without the racket of questions and motives?

One evening when the sense of suffocation was strong in me, unable any longer to bear your company or that of the hermetic flat I went out for a dismal walk, no end in view except exit. It was raining. I'm just going for a walk. You stretched back over the chair with a goony grin and then settled again to your work. All right. The rain fell heavy and dead, not even trying to move. I walked along the hideous streets, aware only that there was no alternative to what I was doing. Go to the pub and meet your friends over a cheery pint, there's always a warm welcome waiting at your local. We went once, and sat shivering in the stained silence watching three youths throwing darts in a corner while the publican stared at the evening paper and the light bulbs wondered how much longer this could go on. Or we could have gone into town and patronized one of those thrilling rendezvous packed with people who are fun to know and be with, except that

we did not know any and could never be with them, separated as we were from their active pleasures by a slight but utterly fatal propensity for noticing some flaw in the harmony, say the barmaid scratching her wrist intently while staring into space and then suddenly glancing down to find what troubled her, and we lost touch with the group for a moment in asking her question. Or the cool number momentarily blown by finding the halfcrown turned to a penny in his hand, blurring his face with the apprehension of youth. Small dirty thoughts, social obscenity, it isn't done but we did it, couldn't help doing it. But here I am using the conjugal we like someone else who thought he owned you. I plodded on through the rain which had now penetrated my mackintosh and dampened the backs of my hands in their pockets.

And you told me afterwards, on a nostalgic evening, that you had not meant me to sleep with you, only that I could stay there if I liked, the other bed being empty. But that it was a good misunderstanding. My nickname for you, in your social therapy mood. The rain was large under the trees, having time to collect on the leaves. And without that, where would we be? Still frittering about. Or perhaps apart, grown bored with each other's sheen. And I would still be at number eleven on stale tea and stringy bacon, or perhaps dead. Drowning I always thought best, for there is a chance of second thoughts when the cold water rams reality back into the lungs after months of

tepid small breath. But wounds or poison, the hurt done, are not so easy to repair, and how could you ever be sure that the man with death in him, a stranger, would still want to die? And then drowning you see all your life behind you, a death in keeping for a past master like myself. Perhaps this is why walking soaked in the rain, a milder version, brings up the memories. Of a day last autumn when we had a bitter row and I stormed out, going to stay with some friends. You rang up the next day, when I did not return, having tried everywhere for me, phoned when we were in the middle of dinner. You sounded sorry, and needing to make it all up had bought and roasted a joint of beef. It had been lying these two hours waiting for me, whom you had trusted to trust you, and had not. So you ate alone and we had the rest the next day, cold. And one morning back in our sunlit room that spring, after we had made love and when I brought you coffee in bed and you stretched loudly and said, I'm beautiful, I feel all new laid this morning. Peculiar that you should like me so much, and others hardly at all. Not that I think of myself as being lonely, but at times, on wet walks, the dreary press of the world which I expect to keep its distance becomes so great that all my life is reduced in seeming to the dribblings of a loser who cannot face up to living and whom nobody likes. And it seemed quite just that they should dislike me, for at that moment, seeing myself from the outside, a nervous mumbling clumsy bully

of a man, I could only imagine my own loathing of such ugliness. Yet if I loathed my loathing was itself loathsome, and so I lost myself between the two great facing mirrors and only the rain, the cold streets, the hissing cars and my wet skin made any sense at all, and the sight of myself in a darkened shop window, shabby and aimless, the only true reflection.

I had walked a long way, into streets I had never seen before, away from the refuge of old age and into a suburb of the war years, when houses were reduced to homes. I wandered along a hard shopping street, waited at a level crossing for a train to roll out of the station, faces behind misted glass. The gates opened, I crossed the rails and turned down a sidestreet in the general direction of back, beside houses of grey breeze block, the expanse of a school playing field opposite. The rain had thinned a little and drifted across the open ground beyond which I could see the lights of the power station down by the docks. I turned another corner, all thought gone but to be home, cold and wet with water dripping down from my hair. A nice quiet discreet avenue with select trees, suddenly narrowing to a bridge over the railway where, at the end of my wishes and reflex acts, I stopped, a sodden bundle looking down at the rails sliding away into the darkness broken only by a single red light.

A laundry of white brick stood beside the bridge, its back wall dropping sheer to the top of the cutting.

The mean little windows were closed and dark. The weeds that grew up from the railway bank clashed unspeakably with the white bricks they hid, caries of any project, the fundamental mistaken premiss of all our attempts, this grim and hopeless back wall that no one thought to maintain properly, hardly expecting it to be noticed except by travellers rushing past in their trains, sheathed from perception in the way they went. But I stood tired and with nowhere to go.

I shivered quickly and violently as a shock of dampness vibrated my skin, then all at once I knew again and was there, tired and wet and wanting to go home. I walked on down the road curving past the laundry, and there by the gates stood a bus, large and warm and altogether lovely. I had stumbled upon the actual site of one of those unlikely streets named on the destination boards. The driver and conductor were sitting inside smoking and when I got in they looked up, as if they had been awaiting me, and at once set about getting the bus live and breathing again. Ere, you been out in the rain then, asked the conductor in a dreamy parody of the kindly worker. Yes, I got a bit wet, I replied, trying hard not to cry. Not much, he told the empty bus. Looks like some old bag was in ere pissing on the floor. Yeh.

And your kindness and concern when I staggered in, the unoriginal human wreck, heading straight into bed with

a hot water bottle. And I lay with the blankets over my nose and peered out from my warm pad at you coping with your marvellous ease with all the paraphernalia of a life that was far too complicated for me, listening to the back-drop of rain and thinking that while wombs are not everything they are certainly very nice.

The weeks before Easter seemed to grow longer as they grew fewer, keeping me the same distance from release. I was living in the vacuum of anticipation, in the artificial time between letter and letter. My week rose to meet Monday, and fell away again, flat as the siren of a passing train. And in so short a time, two letters, I would be riding that train. She warned me not to expect too much, but I was dazzled by the prospect of marrying up the solidity of my life with you with the open horizons of my letters to her. After all, now we had established such a complete rapport in words, how could our gestures let us down? For we always had that ground underlying our tentatives, that would keep them right and preclude the grosser misunderstandings. Since we now knew where we were at, had it in black and purple, how could any passing tempers confuse us? It was foolproof.

Those final days I was alone. You left early, to stay with some relatives before returning to town to complete your examination work. To have the promise of return in my pocket I had bought a ticket weeks before, which

meant now that I had to stay on in the irrelevant town another three days, and without you the time was deadly. I nearly went spare with boredom and despondency, only the foretaste of her company kept me from actually missing yours. But how far you were from my thoughts then. I finally killed the last two evenings by going to see the same sentimental film, which the elevation of my feelings made a masterpiece. And this is what I cannot decide. Are these strange misshapen needy dreams we have really only the sewage of the soul, the perversion of an ingrown mind unable to face the occasional troughs of low pressure that pass over? Or are they aspects, refractions, facets of another state where life becomes fiction, and this life the fiction of a drunken genius? Mangled of course, like the seed gone to shoot in that film, but since we cannot even interpret each other's gestures properly, how could we fail to disembowel and parody the hints of a landscape, a weather, the bars of dried rain on a dirty window which tonight returns my face to me with all its features gone, a cloud of unknowing, watch this space.

But before I break the sulky bubble of those months there is one last walk I want to take with you. It was a Sunday, a day of fear unpleasing to the thinskinne ear, when everyone is indolent and the world falls to pieces. I like the bustle of others making war and coming to agreements and so on, for although their fuss is stupid and their idea of its value hilarious, nevertheless it all

creates a simple hubbub behind which I can comfortably do nothing and wonder if there is anything worth doing and if so what. But when the background din you had ceased to notice suddenly stops, then in the dead silence your flabby wonderings are left bare as the loud word spoken into the suddenly silent gathering, hanging with ridiculous assertion in the air, and you quickly get up and find something to do, put the kettle on, turn on the radio, read the paper. For restless people a day of rest only underlines their failure.

So we went for a walk, down the stripped street where the trees stay where they are put under the leaded sky, in long pruned rows marking the pavements. We passed the tennis courts, where a stout lady in white knickers crouched for the ball lodged in mid air, just above the sweated gentleman's backsprung racket. We left them there and hit the promenade with its mean mat of beach and the uninteresting sea messing around, tired and listless. Where even the sea lost its powers of invention what chance was there for us? We saw a mother leading her forgotten child, a dead seagull toiled in dried seaweed and filth, a starched and blued nurse wheeling an old man whose legs or lack of them were covered by a dull plaid blanket on which his sunken hands lay and grabbed, an artificial pool where a man in a raincoat was sailing a model boat, two thick women in tweed who stood contemplating the silhouette of the power station while at the far end of the taut leash

a straining sausage dog squeezed out its meat on the pavement. Where the promenade ended we found a strange terrace of beach houses. Placed on a cul de sac between docks and ocean, they were fantasy structures, from before the war no doubt. A segment of funsville, castellated sunroofs, lounges with huge windows and faery casements, open ladders leading from one level to another, and facing the sea great porches with concrete doric pillars. But from the plates on the stucco wall screening the rear of the premises it appeared that most of the houses were used as offices by small businesses, a missionary society, a theatrical property agents, Reelife Models, a firm by appointment purveyors of woodland and parks to Her Majesty, one Cosmic Effects and Son. Only two of the houses were privately owned, and the only person we saw was a decayed spinster sitting behind the huge sunwindows in a room furnished as drably as ours, knitting puttees under a standard lamp. On a blazing beach with a cargo of rich idiots, then it might have made some sense. But as we gazed over the rusted barbed wire half buried in shingle, preserving the private beach littered with rotting weed and an oil drum from the public sea, when we saw the broken concrete pillar baring its browned steel core, the scatter of shingle all over the pitted porches, the flaking distempered walls, the squalor, then we had to laugh and speak to each other all the time, for there was in this absurd juxtaposition of lunatic

architecture and dreary overcast dockland something sinister and moving which touched us and our own rococo fancies.

We should have gone back then, but off the path leading back to the main road was an open gateway into the docks, and we went in there instead. The road ran along the spit of land enclosing the docks, between the filthy water on our right and the stacks of timber in a yard shut off from the road with a high wall of concrete slabs. The road itself had that slightly artificial look of roads only used for special traffic, all the signs a little pointless, and even more so the careful pavement, for who but a couple of aimless people with no idea how to organize their time would go walking in this wilderness? It followed faithfully the pattern of the docks, twisting and turning round the wharfs, running over a metal lifting bridge where a man sat under an umbrella fishing the rancid waters of the inner pool. I tried to imagine what he might bring up, and suggested a few ideas on the subject which made you shiver. You were easily frightened by my gothic jokes, though I sometimes wonder if the menace you feared was nearer home, if it was my hand you feared might tip you into the bilge and batter your floating face with stones like a waterlogged balk.

The road turned, slow corner, and reached suddenly straight ahead as far as we could see. A fuel dump for

the power station had replaced the timber yard, and by the dockside further along a coaster was unloading coal. We walked slowly towards it. There seemed to be no bridge across to the mainland, and yet we did not want to simply trudge all the way back along that dreary road. Through the huge gates into the dump we saw a bulldozer bludgeoning the coal up into a vast mound whence some sort of hopper carried it in to the funaces. We reached the ship. Two metal scoops were tearing the liver out of her, dropping and nuzzling the coal. I remembered the hands of the invalid in the wheelchair. The scoops rose and were rolled high over the road into the power station, where nameless things were done to the coal. The overhead tracks had covers underneath, but as we passed below in the racket of the massive cranes moving on their rails a lump of coal came down and exploded on the concrete. A few feet nearer and one of us would now be cherishing the memory of a beautiful and tragic first love, but then you can't have everything.

We walked on. Nobody seemed to notice us. The cranedriver was invisible, hidden in his web, and only two sailors leaning on the rail of the ship gazed mute at us. Behind its wall the power station reared up, a sheer expanse of brick pocked here and there with windows grimy or broken, useless gaps that only made the thing more vast. And above all the chimneys stood churning out the creamy smoke that rose straight into the windless sky,

making another chimney atop the first. An open ladder spidered up to the mouth, and I tried to imagine what man would ever climb such a way up the great belly of the stack and stand there on the top rung with nothing between him and the capsized world below but his own sweaty gripping hands. They're called steeplejacks, you remarked succinctly.

The sun remained hidden, but the cloud had become gradually translucent and the atmosphere sealed below as close as the air over a hot plate. We wandered on along the road, turned to look back at the scene behind us. The scoops could be heard quarrying the coal, hidden by the superstructure of the ship. The two sailors had gone. On the far side of the greasy water a red bus started away from its stop, the ping of the bell just reaching us. There was no way across. A sign on the quay forbode mooring because the ferry docked there. We looked down, but there was only an old skiff with water coloured oily in the bilge and a rusting diesel engine half dismantled on the thwarts. We considered vaguely whether to go on or back. There was no guarantee we could get off this bank of land further along, on the other hand it was quite possible, and going back would be a known drag. And so we kept going. We could see the end of the road now, or rather where it curved away to the left, out of sight. An unlikely car appeared round this bend and crawled towards us, ma pa and the kids rolled past in their mobile tedium. They

stared at us, we stared at them. Perhaps we should have thumbed a lift, I said gaily. You did not smile. I thought about it. Quite right, nothing funny. Why did I say it? It occurred to me. You call that a reason? I can't vet my every word. So statistically you will spend a proportion of your time talking shite. But one man's shite is another man's fertilizer. Careful now, you'll come out with that in a minute. One man's shite, I told the power station, went to sow a meadow. It was very hot.

We reached at last the bend in the road, which I had quite expected to behave like the end of the rainbow, and suddenly found ourselves amid a teeming throng of happy holidaymakers tasting the good life, fishing, sailing, playing ball, listening to a talk on Croatian folk polyphony, just romping through mom's homemade spam sandwiches and cream of sputum soup fresh from the growth, knocking it off on the roof of the car, kicking a dog to death and throwing him one of his own legs to chase after.

We were tired and homesick seeing the beach curve back an incredible distance to the nightmare houses we had stood before. Several of the Sunday gang were eyeing you hotly, and at once the vague shadow who had been following me around fleshed out and became a beautiful weary creature to be rescued. Were we not in love? A series of locks to keep the ships from escaping were provided with catwalks, so mewling joyously we pussyfooted

back to the mainland. A cobbled track brought us up to a main road in an area we had never seen before. We were unspeakably hot and thirsty, but the pubs were closed and the bus we had seen turned out to be the exception that proved some horrible rule. As if to make this quite clear, no sooner had we left the useless bus stop and begun the grim walk home than a bus appeared round the corner and thundered past, the conductor and passengers replying to our frantic gestures with the ritual waves of royalty. I forget whether our mood was soothed or darkened by our realization a moment later that neither of us had any money with us. At least he would have thrown us off at the next stop, you said, and now we have to walk. But it would have been worse, said I, to have been obliged to go afoot once one had grown accustomed to being conveyed. No Sir, you rejoined, it is a simple case of feet and pinches. Not to mention the embarrassment of public penury, I continued. Fuck the embarrassment, you concluded, or might have done if I had thought to include you in my conversation.

The suburban ribbon developed steadily along the far side of the road, while on our side a steep bank dropped to a grassy area at water level, far below, where two solemn children were examining each other's bodies. We passed a bus shelter, stopped, went back and sat down. A young lad was wanted for light duties in a night shift. Mick Loved Mog. I just love being sucked off. And some-

one else wanted to know when. We had an unobstructed view of the power station and the coal boat unloading. A single seagull pitched on a dune of air tipped its wings and slid down to settle on the rigging of the ship. A bus drew up and the conductor gazed at us. I waved at him and he shut the doors quickly, staring.

One had to be going. We got up on our numbed feet and for a moment enjoyed the rhythm of walking again. The sky had turned cold and dull, it was getting near tea time. A religious poster on the wall reminded us that progress comes from attempting the seemingly impossible, to which a shaky hand had added, like Miss Rodgers. This cheered us up a bit and we plodded on. The road dipped to take in a row of old cottages, a street, two pubs and a hoarding showing a manly man beaming at a glass of beer. You stopped a moment and held my arm, balancing on one foot to pull a wrinkle out of your sock. I remarked that whoever was writing this script certainly displayed an acute lack of imagination in spinning our walk out like this. What possible value could it be to us or anybody not to have one of our friends pull up in their car and suppose we did not want a lift home? This was just sheer bloody meaningless grind. But it does give us a personal insight into the basic absurdities of the human experience. Fuck the human experience, I replied. I was talking to myself again.

You had gone sullen quiet, which was what I most

feared, the collapse of my little safety net woven from a continual backchat with myself. Alone I can keep going under most conditions, but faced with the presence of the other for whose hardship I am answerable if not responsible I tend to say fuck the other. You were a drag on my dream souled feet. I found myself mouthing platitudes, keep going it's not far now, we're nearly there, it's not much further, we'll soon be home. To which you replied with an unhelpful candour that made me feel dirty, I know how far it is. We passed an elegant garage done in white milk tile which had gone off in the fumes of petrol and smoke. The forecourt was covered by a portico on pillars and the name of the firm was displayed in sickly green, lettered in one of those depressing types that were modern thirty years ago. How tasteless it all is, you said, and I could only nod. Please, let's keep it funny. We now passed out of the docks and back into the plummy residential slum we knew so well. But it was still far enough to walk, what with a long curve in the coast road. We had a little fun trying to find a sequence in the street names, imagining the next, doing a learned critic routine on this great urban poem composed by an unknown genius for the consolation of weary walkers and then with a remarkable lack of jubilation reached our own dull street, ran the last laughable yards, crashed through the living room where our neighbours had spent a quiet afternoon reading the papers and collapsed wordless on our incandescent beds, where

the quiet room folded up and tucked us in.

And now the room was empty again, dusty and exhausted, the beds stripped, your belongings left as you had last touched them on the dresser, the flat quiet, the windows shut tight. I lifted my holdall and closed the door behind me, banged open the doors into the warm kitchen where a blowfly buzzed and a low slant of sunlight illuminated the stained lino, through the living room, the tapping tiled hall and out to the cold streets where I caught a bus and later a train and a plane and another bus and stood in the great empty terminal listening to the night rain falling firmly on the roofs and streets of the northern city.

I left my bag at the luggage office and walked through the drench in the city I knew so well, transformed now to an awkward paradise where the buses ran a regular service to her house and would take me there for eightpence. I told the conductor my destination and waited for him to wink and leer knowingly, but no, I was just another passenger to him, I was safe, no one knew. I sat back and watched the rain tearing the glass, the greasy dripping streets. So long had I been kept from her by pure physical distance that it had come to seem a more than physical obstacle, I could not see what these commonplace means of transport could have to do with it. I knew I was in a bus going up to her house, but I could not believe

that when I knocked on the door, she would be there.

Nor was she, it was another girl altogether. The far grander gestures of the following year have rendered most of the detail illegible. All I can remember clearly is the shock, of meeting a stranger, a clumsy adolescent who shared everything with the girl I loved, everything but the mind that wrote those letters, the crackle of dreams touching, the power that was about three months before. We tried of course, all evening we gassed away, shifting fart, but our vague heavy attempts on the human plane only reminded us how high we had once been above them. We were thrown together like nationals abroad, who discover that their language is all they have in common. It was finished from the moment she appeared at the door, and though I realized this I did not have the guts to say thank you for trying and leave. The press of feelings I had kept so long for her needed a slow release, and so for the next three days we pottered about, thinking that we had tried too much in an evening, that the weight of so much wanting had unbalanced us, that time and contact would renew the charge in our dead cells. Human thoughts, a physics of the spirit. We went to a cafe, to a bad foreign film, to her house, to mine. But nowhere did we find the fusion which had made us not people together but two aspects of the same reality, making it real by reflection. We remained awkward and embarrassed strangers, seeing less and less of each other as the human dust rose higher and,

after a week, I had almost forgotten this misshapen little girl. So huge was the discrepancy between my dreamy agent of circumstance and this creature that when I abandoned the latter the original remained untouched. She was safe in memory, her double I needed no longer.

My only concern was to know why. Why had we failed to make it, failed so completely, even though we now had the basis of the letters to build on? Next year I did not need to trouble myself with questions since that drama, for which this was only a rehearsal, tightened up the motivation considerably in the interests of maximum impact. But the first time there were plenty of loose ends left for me to chew on, though I could not see what is now so blatant, what the sweating of my innards on the way to her house proved some sense knew even then, that this failure was simply the necessary conclusion to our affair, our coincidence. That was simply a freak effect, a confidence trick which separation kept us from inspecting too closely. The letters were its only possible product, a serial extension of that state of grace into other fields, but all of imagination, dream, image. If I had stayed that Christmas we would not have lasted a week. And of course when we tried to reinvent that silence it was no longer a not needing to speak but the silence of the cold tight withdrawn stranger who had usurped her body and turned her reticence and tact into jerky parodies of themselves, planned for effect. We had begun to watch each other, and the person I saw

sickened me.

And so my holiday disappeared and I was left with a gaping fortnight to fill before returning to the town I had left so completely. I remember thinking, as the old values appeared again with a complacent smirk, how lucky I was to be able to go through this whole meteoric affair and still have you to fall back on. You certainly come in handy at times. I even felt a certain relief after thinking it all over, at the end of what had threatened to be a rather intense experience. And then the upheaval, for I should have had to collect all my stuff and break up my settled life, start all over again. So, a little disappointed but on the whole indifferent, I whiled away the time in a round of drink, chat and hot meat pies.

It was only after a week that I began to notice how much I was missing you. Partly the poverty of having to sleep alone and partly the need of your company suddenly hatched one long night into a blinding desire to be with you. I had been drinking heavily and found I could not sleep. Lying awake between three and four in the morning I decided there and then to get out. For the first time in months I felt what it was to want a simple thing and be able to have it. It was a gulp of lemon juice. I reflected on the beautiful certainty of our love, the absence of unpleasantness and stupidity, the reliability of you and your pleasure in seeing me again unexpectedly. I dressed, went down and made breakfast, listened to the

radio until it was light and then caught a train into the city. Unfortunately the first flight I could get was late that evening and I had to waste the day, drinking with two friends and wandering around the tidy public gardens. The plane dropped me at one in the morning and I spent my second sleepless night in a fine glassy air terminal, the same, in fact, where I had met you a year previously, a picture under your arm. I sat and smoked and thought of things that had happened since and of your smooth body in bed at that moment, until my head ached with tobacco smoke and canned air. Before dawn the cleaners making their rounds chased me about so much I collected my bag and walked out into the freezing night, although I knew the underground would not be open yet. But when I reached the entrance I found it unlocked and lit up. Punchdrunk with lack of sleep I wandered dreamily down the steps. I saw no one in the empty lighted corridors. Eventually I came out on the platform, still alone. This was better than nothing, so I sat down on my bag and tried to stop sliding into a dream where wishing created the sounds of a train approaching. But it was no use, I was too tired and in came the train. The doors opened and I got into an empty carriage. Some time later it appeared we had reached the station I wanted so I got out. The doors closed and the train disappeared. I climbed an obliging set of steps and it was only when a man put his hand on my arm and said something that I stumbled slightly in this

hitchless dream journey. He asked where I had got on. I thought this was not quite the usual routine, but told him anyway. Sixpence, he said. At last I understood. He wanted money. Thank God for popular fiction, give him money and he'll go away. I gave him a shilling with a cheery wave, though he seemed a bit bashful about accepting it. Must be new to begging. The station was forsaken in greying light, littered with newspapers and mail bags. I was cold and hungry and very tired. I fell asleep in the train and woke up and the passengers in my compartment kept changing. I fell asleep and woke up shivering, lying on the floor of an empty compartment. The window was wide open and it was pitch dark outside and blowing a gale. I was wondering helplessly what trap I had fallen into when the train broke out of the tunnel and ran down the hillside into the town. I forced myself to stay awake long enough to get off the bus at the right stop, pitched down the street with my lead bag, along the alley beside the house, through the back door. I leaned on the door to the bathroom passage. It was locked. I kicked it a few times. There were sounds within. Who is it? I kicked again. Keep it as a lovely surprise. She doesn't expect me for a week. Pad pad pad. The catch opened and your face appeared. I smiled as well as I could, feeling like death warmed up, ready for the rapturous greeting. Jesus Christ, you said, what are you doing here? It crossed what remained of my mind that you had someone in bed with

you, but no, as I followed you humbly through into the bedroom, explaining that I had wanted to see you, I found the room empty. Do you know what time it is? Bloody seven o'clock. And I've got to be up at nine. You climbed back into your warm bed, pulled the covers up round your neck and turned over, putting your head under the pillow. I stood and looked round. Hullo room. Then swamped by a wave of total defeat I fell down on the damp bed and asleep, to dream horribly and at length.

I woke. The lights were out and the room empty, a dull watery light from the curtains only. The house was silent. It felt like the afternoon, but the clock had stopped. I struggled out of bed and got dressed, hung-over with weariness. I pulled back the curtains. It was dusk outside, cold and bleak, the shabby rose bush on the opposite wall swaying spasmodically in gusts of wind. I flopped back into the armchair. Letters. I went over to my drawer of papers and took out the packet. Back in the chair I read right through those hard bright and suddenly tender lines, stared out of the window at nothing in particular, then tore them up and took them through to the living room, to burn the fragments in the stove.

I sagged back into the sofa, fucked on all fronts. I had to get out, get my own room away from this squalor and loose despair. What time was it? I forced myself up and went out. The wind was sharp and mean, plucking at my coat and raising goosepimples all over my body. I

bought a paper and wandered back into the edge of the wind. My old physical horrors returned, a swinging shop sign falling and slicing my tomato head, toes crushed under a passing wheel, my skin scraped away by a blunt knife in the wind, an arrow shot in to my nipple. My flesh shivered and I moaned quietly. The house was cold and deserted. I sat down on the baggy sofa and looked through the rooms to let.

Some time later you came in. It was dark by now, you only saw me after crossing the room to switch on the light. Another surprise. Perhaps you had forgotten about me during the day I had lost in sleep. Perhaps you were not really very glad to see me there at all. Or perhaps you just did not like nice surprises. Anyway, you seemed to think it quite a good idea when I announced I was moving out. It would give us another room and greater freedom for the summer coming. I would find somewhere at the far end of town and we could spend our days together on the beach, as before.

As if to ratify our decision the following day was bright and hot with big bushy clouds, one of the scouts of summer. I found a room in two hours, took it for a month with money borrowed from you and moved in by the evening. It was a pleasant place, huge and bare with windows down to the floor, a balcony and a chaise longue. It had the morning sun and a view of the sea, the exorbitant rent I would afford by finding a job. You helped me over with my

belongings that evening and approved. It really did seem that things were going to be better. After all, even plants and animals will pine in a habitat not their own, and we were young yet. You stayed that night between my smelly sheets, and left the next morning after a breakfast of coffee and fresh bread from a bakery just around the corner. I reclined on the chaise longue and read the paper, flicking my cigarette ash over the balcony whence it was brushed by a light sea breeze on to the heads of the populace below. I was in business again.

Summer bred a madness in our blood, a high we had felt the previous year. In towns built like this one on the pattern of a perfect day in July, winter weather comes only as an accident. An accident which regularly swallows half the year or more, but which in its very irrelevance is overpowered by those long burning days when it comes to seem that this time the year will not get lost and wander into autumn but keep its hold on the bracing meaning of summer. And this was our philosophy too, parasites of the town that we were. Our year leaned towards summer, it came as a return to normality, the careless fragmentation of rules now superfluous became a way of life, a delayed right and not a dangerous loan. In full face of the sun the threat of cloud was dazed out of mind.

But this summer, instead of dropping our ballast in search of a freer way of being together we cast off in different directions and barely touched. For we now lived

at opposite ends of the town and it could take an hour on the bus to get from one to another. It has often struck me that if we had been able to afford a car when we were together, we should probably be happily married now. It would have been simpler for you to have moved in with me, but for various reasons we neither of us wanted that. For my part I was already jealous of my privacy and anxious to keep the space clear for any possible developments. We visited each other regularly, but although we never thought of separating, and I got quite a kick, as once before, out of revisiting the hole in which I was no longer trapped, we had nevertheless opted for a less intimate existence, or rather admitted at last the gradual shoaling of our love. We even realized this change in words, unusually, but agreed that our irritation with each other was simply a result of living too closely together, on top of one another. Although in fact this last position was the only one in which we never quarrelled.

When I finished the paper I tossed it over my shoulder, put on swimming trunks under my jeans and went down the clattering brown lino stairs and out into the sunshine. Down to the front where I overlooked the beach and then trotted down the steps to join the idle few who could afford to share the morning with me. And there I lay, racked on the shingle until noon, when I returned with spinning head to my room for lunch and a quiet smoke.

The people upstairs would be playing records, one in particular I can never hear now without all the sweet mince of that summer rising in my throat. I sat there on the chaise longue with the window open and breezing me, and the possibilities of life were endless and worth any risk.

Towards evening you would usually come and cook a meal, and then we would sit reading or talking. And yet your company irked me, your very presence was becoming a constant reminder of my failure to take life by the scruff of the neck, of my cowardice and lack of imagination when it came to living. You at least had decided by now on a future. A firm had offered you a post in Australia which you had accepted, you would be leaving in the autumn. And we made no plans for the summer. We were in fact assuming that our affair was over. It had never been more than provisional, now the period of its viability was drawing to a natural close. There would be no point in spinning it out over the holidays. I had no very clear idea what I was going to do, but every time I looked up at you sitting bent over a page of calculations, tapping your teeth with your pen, every time I glanced at your face and saw an expression so familiar I could see nothing else, every time you spoke and I heard only the background hum of a voice that could say nothing new, then I cursed myself for not doing it. Yes you were a nice companion and good in bed, but the part of my world you contained I had

been over again and again and every morning the scope and carry of the sunstruck sea widened my mind with the same inner adjustment the eye feels in leaving close print for a landscape beyond the window. You became reduced for me then to what in a quite different way you have remained, a reproach in human form.

All this came later, of course, but now we were set moving the calendar ceases to have any importance, events keep their own time. At some stage I met someone who was trying to form a group to play the town, which he had fairly well staked out. We talked for a while and dropped names and I ended up going in with him, playing piano and organ. The work never turned out as frequent as he promised, but it took care of the rent and left me a lot of time free, which was all I asked. It wasn't until we got together that I discovered our drummer was an evening edition of the bus conductor who had a room two floors above me. I went up there to hear his records and work out a few routines and we got to know each other quite well.

This was all dandy, but even the best of men holds only a limited appeal for me. It was a woman I wanted, a woman who would take my life apart, strip away the carapace of habit and let me see and feel one to one again, without intermediary. Unless we become as little children we will never enter the kingdom of this world, never mind the next. Where was she? In lieu of her I went to you,

my love, almost every day you stayed at home. For it was one thing when you were before my eyes as a focus of frustration, but when, left to my own devices, I could find no way into the brave new world I felt my due, then I usually ended up tracking the well worn grooves to your house.

Even there summer was making a mark. The mornings were brighter and the evening lighter, the room lost all its old menace and became a quiet and soothing parlour. The landlady had even taken the plastic bags off the choice shrubbery in the back garden. We could recline on deck-chairs in the urban but sheltered yard. As usual I accepted everything you offered me, but as usual with unspoken and indeed unspeakable reservations. From where would the great bolt I was expecting strike? I had no doubt it would come in the form of a woman, since nothing else had or has the power to take me out of myself. Apart from physical inconveniences such as starvation and death I could live through a revolution, nuclear war or the end of the world without the least interest or involvement, but I have only to walk a few yards down a crowded street for my mind to be battered soft as steak by the infinite promise of women's bodies, each one a parcel of possibilities realized in flesh and spiced with lust. But which one was she, and how would we recognize each other?

Coming in one evening, taking off your coat you remarked in a jocular way that you had met a couple of girls on the stairs, art students who lived on the floor above.

Perhaps I might like to try my hand with them? You were always twigging me about my philandering instincts. But as it happened I had already seen them, the one thin and mousy, the other stocky and short, both of them obviously common and shallow with that peculiar combination of frenetic energy and tight horizons which makes me feel ill. Busy little minds like the turbulence in half a glass of cider.

And so the heap of newspaper behind the chaise longue thickened and the texture of my life thinned, towards that moment when the very rarity of experience brings incident into being, for otherwise we would risk dissolving into suspension, a membrane of mind stretched over the fixed points of a universe steadily expanding in the heat of the sun, through which the passing minutes would leave events strained out as pure relation, a zodiac of grounds on the drying muslin. Or perhaps it is simply that the nebulous independence of people in this state of levitation draws others towards them, for we all love the scent of freedom found.

The days when one woke up, stumbled over to draw back the curtains from the seething sea, and was cheated. A damp muggy time set in, thick white mist steamed in off the water and wrapped up the front in dampness. Above all you could feel the sun informing the shroud light, on the downs the days were as brilliant as before, only in these streets facing the sea was everything smothered in

fog. You came over one afternoon to see a film at the cinema round the corner. Would I go with you? No, I would not. While I sought a landing place for my leap from the old life to the new I sensed just over there, in the mist, while I hung with one foot in the air like a man waiting the right moment to leap from a moving bus, for all this you were irrelevant, a distraction, more, a bad angel who appealed to my worst weaknesses, sloth and inertia. And even when for the moment I tired of these acrobatics and lay back with you to rest, even then you were of no more significance than the light switch my hand groped for on opening the door at night, confidently, knowing it would be there and that in pressing it I would get light. All this is easy to mangle and cheapen, but let us at least try to keep the hard and infinitely painful pattern of recreated reality from degenerating into a melodramatic saga of goodies and baddies.

You returned from the film in that expansive mood you had worn during the summer holiday, as if contact with that world where people and food were nice and houses warm and bright and the trains ran on time had left you on a personal high and able to cope better. But a few minutes of my dreamy disinterest soon brought you back, the lower for your fall. And although we made it up in bed, even here our pleasures were only absolute immediate ones. I watched you undress without excitement, wandered round behind the partition to the basin still white with a trace

of your spat toothpaste, flushed it and washed my face. I considered myself in the mirror, with contempt for my inability in these suggestive new surroundings to do anything but reenact the old show. I walked back into the room, wondering idly if I was getting fat, and there you were in the same blue and white nightgown, under the grimy covers of the bed, and I felt as never before that you did not belong there, and that you felt it too. We no longer lived together. You had simply come to visit, and our interest in each other was only in the visit of an old friend to whom one has not really anything much to say.

But, as I drifted back after putting out the light and got in beside you, it was if not the same as ever at least no worse. For in the dark we were only lengths of flesh without reservations from each other, although secrets in plenty. It might have seemed that there at least we grasped each other again, as I lay screwing you, or beside you, rubbing your breasts until you came, but it was only a simulacrum of love. It was not your breasts I rubbed raw but a monstrous abstraction, a female body, and it was not the sense of your sweetness and passion lying under me that whipped up my thighs but a picture from my rogue's gallery, a torso from the beach, a pair of legs seen in the street, the chunky sensuality of the girl upstairs. You did duty for all of these, and while our pleasure in the act was no less than before, it would not now spread its ripples beyond and transfigure the coldness of your sleeping back or

the noise of my snoring or the constant clash of two distinct bodies sleeping in a bed only wide enough for one.

Left alone by every girl but you, isolated from you by every girl not you, and yet not lonely but waiting amidst a supersaturation of possibility, awaiting the speck, the grain of grosser fact that would precipitate a new and unforeseeable order. My summery life was ecstatically empty, a state of constant readiness for the moment I knew must soon arrive, for this was no state but a balance too subtle to be maintained, and since I could not go back I should have, somehow, to go on. My condition is not opacity but a continually changing transparence which only exists in so far as I reflect another person, and during those weeks there was no one to show me who I was.

It was the following evening. I had been out for a long walk along the dusky promenade, for the fog always lifted towards sunset. I felt more exposed there, as if the intention had more chance of reaching me than when I sat shut up in my room. Yet at no time did I try and shift for myself. I had already learnt that when things are going to happen they happen anyway, and if they are not no amount of pushing on my part will ever make them. And so I strolled along the upper promenade, glancing about me at the great houses and the road softened by the evening air, at the fishermen standing beside their wrack fires at the water edge, the lucky lovers secure in their world where cog in mesh turns the wheel and keeps time moving.

For although I walked step by slow step down to the pier and back along the beach in the scramble of the wash breaking, yet I should not have been greatly surprised to find it no later on my return. I was in a pause where time meant as little as it does in the middle of music, or in the silence between a gun going off and the shell exploding. It was as if the tape had come loose and the machine was simply taking up slack, leaving the full spool with its unheard voices and strange new words untouched. I walked on down to the water and spun a stone out, four dabs at the sea surface smooth as a huge eyeball. Behind me the tall white houses stood out against the last of the light, up on the high promenade. I crunched back over the pebbles and up the steps, back to my meaningless room. It would be better to catch a bus and go and see you. No, that's only defeatism. Anyway you'll be wrapped up in your work and I can sit here as well as there, reading. Give it another hour anyway. There's always that if all else fails.

There were feet outside, a knock at the door. It was the drummer. They were having a ball upstairs, the girls and himself, would I like to come up? I went. This was it. Not the mouse but the cat, the chunky one. I knew at once and instinctively, closed my eyes and, at long last, leapt.

My landing was a little uncertain, the slope rather steeper than I had expected, my wits unused to the diffi-

culty, the rapid adjustments. I didn't tell you anything about it of course, the time when we had that sort of confidence in each other had long gone by. Besides, I had a faint memory of another affair, eons ago, when I had been glad that you were still there to catch me after mistaking the pitch of my attempt. And for a week, two weeks, old and new kept their spheres without collision. You continued to come to visit, I began going out with the girl upstairs. One evening when we had gone off to the pub in the company of her student crowd, who eyed me warily, the joker in their pack, you called to a locked door for the first time in our life. But I explained it easily enough, I had been out for a long walk, along the cliffs. For some strange reason we never crossed except when the line was clear. But I soon began putting you off my place with specious excuses, that I would rather have a change of air by coming to see you, that you did not really like my room anyway, no I can tell, and it would be better if I came to yours. And meanwhile I was exploring my new catch.

I found her a strange mixture of religious upbringing and adolescent angst, groping about in books and people for the answer to her sweaty little problems. One of those whose confusion is simply a tangle of knots they are too clumsy to undo, and which they hoard and display as if this muddle were their most precious asset. And yet I had chosen her. My weary waiting had decided she was the

one, and I did everything to believe it. We first got to grips after that evening at the pub, for she was the sort that becomes voluble and delightful in a bubbly way after two glasses of cider, her only drink of course. We wandered through the town made for these moments, down to the darkened shingle where we stood and watched the rolling gleams that the waves caught from the promenade lights behind us. And then stepped along the track of the miniature railway to the platform where we sat and talked. Drivel, but it was new, a new set of names and faces. And my hopeful heart is always ready to silence the wincing intellect and fathom a fellow under all the accumulated garbage of crippled cliché and popular jargon. At least she tries, I told myself, whereas you never left the safe and narrow. At least she's pointing in the right direction, and is it not for me to help her out? Better a thousand times someone who drops again and again into pretension and banality than the tepid good taste of my life with you. For pretentiousness can stumble on truth, but tact will only ever breed good manners.

She was hung up with both her own problems and those of her chums in the student set. Her boyfriend had just broken it off with her, no I wasn't to think that was why she was going with me, when she saw me she was going to give him the push anyway, and then her room mate had terrible problems and she thought they should stick together, like spaghetti, because that was the way they

worked, they had always been a little group. I didn't like this little group bit much, for it was clear that I was only an associate member of it by virtue of her having taken up with me, but I hoped to wean her from these tepid trivialities into the fullblooded intensity of an affair with me. By God she would soon learn what had hit her. And then she was creative after a fashion, was charming in her tentative indecision, she would open up new horizons for me at a time when I would have fucked a dead cow for the experience, she had in her body a heavy peasant sensuality that was new to my touch, and above all she seemed to like me. We said good night on my landing, and later, lying on the chaise longue and wishing I had your blotting paper body to soak up my lust for her, I decided that all in all we would give it a go.

The next day I rang you, to ensure a clear field. I was going out for a drink with my fellow musicians. Again the inbred reluctance to burn boats. But since my apparent motive in all this was to do just that, why did I not relish this opportunity of finally cutting loose? Perhaps it was also a childish delight in secrecy, in running two households, each unknown to the other. I certainly thought myself a pretty smooth operator as I travelled over to see you the following afternoon. It was a close muggy day, the top deck trapped and stale. The evening had gone off well. She had come downstairs to me and we spent the time talking, she did some painting

and I made coffee. She told me about her childhood, a tight safety net of sins and expiations, about her life in town, about her plans for the future. She wanted to go away, alone, and find herself. I told her that the proper place to look was in the reflection of other eyes, that in solitude the petty personality most of us have dries up like spilt petrol. She said that was all very well but how did I know what was right for her?

I experienced a moment of distinct unease at this. I had taken for granted that she would treat my opinions with the respect they deserved, coming from me. I was willing to be patient with her stupidity, but I was darned if I was having her talking back. But, of course, this was itself stupid and unworthy. Indeed, who was I to tell her what was right? Yes, very true. Perhaps after all she is a real opaque person, not just an anthology of attitudes I ran through five years ago. And then, anyway, one man's holiday is another man's home. It's not her beliefs that count but what she does with them. Let every man be presumed flesh until he proves himself cardboard. Ah, what fine uplifting sentiments. What a rare example of restraint and toleration. God, she better just realize what a man I am now, that's all. Such heartwarming magnanimity must not be wasted on trash like her.

In the meantime she had been talking, and I had not heard a word. She was telling me about her ex, about what a tremendous manly creative brute he was but how

they didn't get on. I think she described them as incompatible. Were we compatible, I asked. She said we must be because we disagreed about everything. And then we started talking about you. She asked. I said I had been living with you, making it clear I expected this arrangement with women, for a year and a half. We had grown tired of each other. I wanted her to take the credit for a separation which had not yet occurred, but this above all seemed to worry her, as though she feared the responsibility of taking over from such an affair, for her so very long. I reassured her by saying that you had been going to go abroad in the summer anyway, so it made no difference. This cheered her up, and then she suddenly remembered that one day she had seen us walking down the street to the promenade together, I had made you walk on the opposite pavement, love, so that those girls above should know I was in business, seeing us from their window. She remarked that she had fancied me from the start but had nearly got put off seeing me with you. If he's the sort of bloke would go round with a girl like that, in that grotty green skirt nearly down to her knees, well I thought good luck to him.

As she said this it crossed my mind that you were in every way infinitely superior to this lumpy girl. It had no effect on me otherwise, for your faded image still tired my eyes, but I soon shut her up talking like that about people she did not know. In a suddenly muffled voice

she apologized, and we moved on as though nothing had happened.

And now as I progressed towards you, towards the dead end of town, although I accepted the new arrangement gladly and bit into it as the first fresh food I had tasted for a long while, yet in the halcyon summer which had spawned it all I sensed something I had forgotten about, something I had never expected now of all times. In that flawless deep heatwave, in the new pattern of my life forming and hinting itself into the future I sensed with a wild attempt to shrug it off another hot still day, my earliest memory, sitting on the parapet of a high railway bridge, my father holding me by the ribs. I ought really to remember the fear of falling or the clamorous passage of the great express we had come to watch on its way north, or at least the whirl of damp smoke that flowered over me as the engine clipped the edge of the bridge, but no, this I reconstructed later. All I truly recall is the waiting, the heat and dull sky, endlessly flat land, the sole birds flying, the railway lines reaching away into the haze where at length they met and vanished, the total silence which it seemed no sound could ever break, no train or any other living thing ever arrive, just the two of us there waiting in that afternoon, for ever. I think perhaps I have liked trains ever since for the bustle and plosion of that one express.

And for a moment, as I turned the corner into your

street, hot and dusty, an old woman polishing her windows, I felt a great terror, as if I had broken some benevolent spell and let loose in my ways a power I could not control. And it was as if to my mother's arms that I came into yours, and chattered to you about little things and laughed and kissed you. But later, when we were down playing tennis on the courts by the promenade, a man came into the court dragging a child and yelled at one of the women at the next net, I cannot work with this bloody child in the house, take him away, I'm going. And it was overcast, as if to rain, the wind sprang up around our sweaty bodies and we went back to the room, toast and jam, tea with sugar.

But the next evening, when the sky was rich with colour until the streetlamp outside my window came on and put it out suddenly, then I had no fear of anything but muffing my part in this piece. She stayed downstairs that night, after I had talked her into it and an hour of petting on the chaise longue had left us both hot and puffy. Curiously she seemed less disturbed by whatever echoes of mortal or venial sinning remained from the convent than by what her mousy friend upstairs would think of her. I made a few quick statements about the latter, a mistake I had anticipated and tried to prevent, and then had to backtrack and agree that she was a very nice girl and that all the crowd were a very nice crowd and that when I said they could go and fuck themselves it was

only a turn of speech. Actually I think she only objected as a formality. It seems my influence in person is quite strong, but vanishes the moment I turn my back. As long as she was there with me, face to face, I believe the group therapy nonsense left her head except for reflex reactions. Indeed if I had taken the trouble to keep her in sight once the holidays came I might even be lumbered with her now. Anyway, to bed she came. She had already explained that the painter she had just broken off with had broken into her fairly brutally before leaving, that it had hurt and left her frightened physically as well as tinkling like a prayer wheel with distant moral injunctions. I felt genuinely sorry for her, even a pang of love for her cow-like timidity, which I could see getting very badly scalded and bandaged up in a middle age devoted to children and other pets. And she was beautiful, with her long hair and huge dark eyes, her flesh with the softness that will soon be fat. Her big balloon breasts that she carried so awkwardly, unsure what to do with them, fine and round when she bent down or raised herself on her arms, but which when she lay back degenerated into helpless jellies that were more touching than exciting, with their weak unsucked nipples that never stiffened with love. And yet with her beside me in the narrow bed, with the strange smell of her and the richness of her flesh I could not help being roused, though I made love to her with more desperation

than pleasure, for I could see she was feeling only pain and whatever I did had decided to feel only pain, and only the sheer pornographic thrill of having her naked and under me made me go on. But things would change, indeed if anything this difficulty only made me feel the more engaged in that world I knew only by report, conversation and books. Women were supposed to find sex unpleasant at first, men were supposed to enjoy them anyway, finally they were both supposed to adjust and find in this developing harmony a physical analogy to their growing love. My life with you had been far too easy, now I was learning all over again, the hard but ultimately rewarding way.

The next day I went over to see you for lunch. It was a clear day of unmarked china blue, the sun disappearing into its own brilliance. The people shopping were gay and wore bright colours, the town looked confident, even the conductor smiled. You were lying out in the back yard beside the french windows, open for the first time in living memory, having dug out two canvas couches. The pussies shared the other, and so far from being cramped they looked positively pampered. The yard was a small suntrap, quiet and mellow with warm brickwork and the leafy shrubs. A prickly plant of some kind stood in a plastic flowerpot filled with parched earth and two towels hung dazed from the clothesline. I brought out a deckchair and stripped to the swimming trunks I wore everywhere in

summer.

As I lay abask I tried as deeply as I could to find the crack, the difference between this occasion and all the previous times I had been with you. After all, there had to be a difference. I had started another life, linked myself to another girl, spent a week and more with her, had slept with her only the previous evening. Somewhere I had to be able to trace some tangible lack in this afternoon scene, and by clinging to that act authentically as a changed man and give you a chance to sense the change. Yet I could not find this point of departure. It was ridiculous, here was I behaving to you exactly as though nothing had happened, indeed I was even beginning to wonder what if anything really had happened. It was a filthy deception on my part and yet I could find no adequate way of avoiding it, since I felt exactly the same towards you and the pussies and the house as I always had. Here, now, it was as if my other life was of no account, yet when I was with her you were only a poor memory. There seemed no way whatever between, my reality was simply what I happened to be living at any given moment. But this was unthinkable. I had acted precisely to create a hiatus between old and new, and now I could find no ground on which to seek the meaning of that change. Old and new were two unrelated fragments, two sides of a coin such that if I looked at one, the other was obscured. Their only connection was that I had posited both as happening

to the one person that I called me, and now I found I could not locate this person. Of course the coin is made of metal, but if you look for the metal you will see only the design, one or the other. I had the choice of me with you or me with her, what I could not discover was the pure and untouched self from which to peel off both designs and stamp one on the other, making a person not merely different but changed.

Huge bloated clouds were blowing in off the sea and taking the sun from us in brief spells. The pussies got up and went in. I moved over to their couch.

I toyed with the power I had of telling you straight out that we were finished. That would certainly bring out the change, but it was crude and untrue. I did not feel we were finished at all, in fact I was enjoying lying there and murmuring to you, enjoying the light tan on your skin and appreciating for the first time just how restful your company was, how civilized. It was all very well deciding to tell you, but tell you what? What were the words that would exactly circumscribe the situation? I've fallen in love with someone else? That was stupid, I had fallen in love with you and if the word covered both cases it meant nothing. I have found someone who symbolises for me a new order of things as clearly as you represent the old? Oh sure, I could imagine your cackles over that. So you're mixing with metaphors, eh. Anyway, I only played with the idea of telling you, as the mind

will play with any idea it knows itself incapable of enacting. I could not see myself actually saying any words which would brutally present you with the situation, take it or leave it, even if I could find some which did not entirely misrepresent it either in themselves or in the context of me speaking to you. I might find myself imagining the effect of that dirt clogged garden fork lying against the wall suddenly driven with force into the soft folds of your brown stomach, but the idea was only supportable even as an idea, I did not vomit and scream even at the thought only because it unfolded in a dimension of thought alone, a fork, a stomach, for which the visible objects provided only an illustration. I could no more bring myself to actually speak definite words to your ears, lying there, than I could have dreamt of taking that particular fork in the hands that would sooner have fallen from my wrists. Yet the thought was mine, I entertained such a thought.

It was now very cold in the yard, the breaks of sunshine between the clouds grew shorter and not worth waiting for. We packed up the couches and took them inside again. As I closed the french windows I noticed the peak of a hammerhead cloud over the wall of the adjoining house. The air was quiet and close. We got out of our swimming costumes, and struck with desire I went to you and cupped your sweet firm breast in my palm. But it was cold, we would make love later, when we went

to bed. The room had grown dark with the clouding outside. We got dressed. You were standing in your skirt and blouse, buttoning it up. You said you would come over the next day and we could spend the afternoon on the beach and you would make a curry in the evening. I remembered the girl, who was to come and pick me up for a party one of the art crowd were giving. I said it would be nicer if I came over here, we could go on this beach as well as the other and anyway you had all the food stuff here. You were brushing your hair at the mirror over the dressing table. You said you preferred the beach at my end of town, it was cleaner. Then with a laugh and a touch of curiosity you asked was I in with some other girl over there or what, I seemed so anxious to keep you away from the place. I paused a moment in silence, too long to dismiss.

Actually I'm having a rather touching little affair with the girl upstairs.

I did not look at you, you said nothing. The room was very dark now, but I could not go and turn on the light. I tried to force myself to realize what had happened, where I was, but all I felt was revulsion at the coy superiority of my words and a dull palpitation of shock, as after orgasm one moves a heavy limb, on that bed, how many times, the folded counterpane with a crease in the top layer, a bulging vein over which the fly crawls on the sleeping hand. The light outside was so heavy it started to rain in big thick drops. I looked

out at the yard. It seemed incredible that on that puddled concrete, by those rain washed walls, we should have sat basking in the sun only a few minutes earlier.

And still you said nothing. You had turned back to the mirror and were brushing your hair, only slightly more firmly than before. It was as if I had spoken in a foreign language and we were both trying to sift some sense out of the jumble of words still sounding in our heads. But of course what I had done was to speak the only words prohibited in the game we had played for so long, so that the first reaction was to wonder if I really meant what I seemed to say, if there was not some way of interpreting my words within the limits of that game. For although I had no understanding of just how intricate and irreparable a structure I had just smashed, yet I realized that no valid reaction to my words was possible. For as long as we stayed together we must either keep silent or carry on as if nothing had happened, as if we could still talk. If you had been cheaper and nastier we might have had one of those what do you mean by treating me like this after all I've been through rows they go in for on the television, but as it was you asked what, now I come to think of it, was the only logical question. Which one? The short one, the dark haired one, you know. You paused and simply stared at me. Then with a little giggle you asked if I was serious. Yes, I suppose so, as serious as I ever am. And your face

very slightly hardened, not changing but setting in the expression it wore, so as not to change. You stood up. Will you stay and have a meal? I've got some sausages. You were pleading almost.

But I had had enough. I said I was sorry but I had to be getting back, and the appalling lameness of this politeness in the context of what you now knew struck me as equal to a physical blow. But I could not stand any longer the unreality of this scene, under your quiet and astonished eyes the whole business seemed absurd, almost obscene in its gratuity. I knew if you questioned me I should start sounding pompous and end up clinging stubbornly to the fact whose meaning I could no longer realize. You stood still, looking at me, and I saw that this refusal to stay had in its immediacy given my vague words depth and form and hideous colour. What I had meant was simply that in a situation like this I would not stay with you but go to another girl, that and all the other instances the future would reveal. I left you in an awkward embarrassed way that suddenly threw me back two years, and in that moment you appeared, here she is as a child and this one was taken last summer isn't the resemblance astonishing, as the dimension separating two cardboard figures, two flat facts, a dimension I had now sealed for good. You were complete, perfect, I could see you in the round and throw you away.

The party turned out a fiasco. I brought half a

bottle of whiskey, used most of it and ended up scrawling lewd words all over the lovely white wall. I tried to entice girlie into the bedroom but she declined. All right, all right. Show her what a considerate fellow I am. Sex? I'm above it, in control. But I did learn a little more about the group she surrounded herself with, a herd of buffalo, their wildly unstable affairs and intrigues which might have been worthwhile if they had lived them with more than the gross ingenuity of a serial writer permutating his characters. Among which from time to time a new personality is tossed by way of seasoning, a guest appearance. But unfortunately I did not mix, either overpowering everyone else or fading away behind an inane smile of goodwill to all men. Which made me either arrogant or condescending.

She told me the next day that I had spent the last hour at the party sitting on the window ledge bawling highly coloured descriptions of everyone in the room to the night air outside. Having passed the point of isolating me as a character, such a laugh, they tried to ignore me. When that got to be a strain two of them, one of whom I had just described as carrying his balls in his jeans like an old hag her scrawny tits, decided to pitch me out through the window, and only desisted when the host pointed out that I was bigger than either of them and might wreck the room before succumbing. However it all ended happily with my belated but reliable vomiting, which

the doctor tells me is the aftermath of a jaundiced liver, but I who have lived so often through that swaying horror when the newly minted world which seemed to have everything in vague store suddenly and finally slams down the hatch leaving you naked and sottish under the stars, I know that the jaundice is much further gone than that. And I remembered in the drowning simultaneity of that spew your kindness once before, while she stood distantly between me and the grinning mob, looking like a matron whose dog has just fouled the footpath, after a rotten party at which I made strenuous attempts to lech up to any and every girl but you, how you guided my steps home and held my sick and wallowing head in your hands while I tried to thrust order into it by working out the properties of a triangle from first principles, but the triangle buckled and collapsed, the sides became windscreen wipers and a straight line went to any lengths and the geometry of the world collapsed and I sicked up again in an abyss of pure relativity where you were the only fixed point, who later that night held a white glazed pudding basin for me to gush and spit into, leaning out of bed and gazing sadly at the ingredients of your cookery bound together with a liaison of saliva.

But that night there were only three handy blokes who, having dismissed me as an idiotic showoff who could not hold his drink, finally destroyed me by being nice, running me home in their car and pushing me through my

door, which they shut, clattering off back to the party and leaving me to collapse on my bed and clutch my pillow, swallowing filth and calling out on my breath your name, your name my love.

However, when she eventually appeared the following afternoon it was not for the easy slanging match offered but simply to point out in her usual unemotional way that I made her position a bit off acting like that and that the crowd was very decent once you got to know them but you couldn't expect to be accepted as one of them straight away could you? And they were going for an outing the next day, would I like to come? All I looked for then was the peaceful healing evening ahead of us, and so agreed without thinking. I had to buy time alone with her by joining in her communal activities, but I still had hopes of diverting her from these by a personal fire of such intensity as to pale her group games.

We went down town and sat under the blasé moon in the yard of a pub where the smart set go to nibble a gin, the students expand over mild shandy and I munched the hair of the hound and chatted to her about the future. We thought vaguely of going away somewhere together, she to pursue her painting and I to remove her from the gravitational field of her pals into the freedom of an affair for two. She listened with one ear, nodding at the wrong places and generally acting distracted. When I cornered her about it she said only that she was confused and did

not know what to do, that she was going to fail her diploma, that she was at a great crossroads in her life and was lost for a direction to take and keep to. Since I had no answer to these invented problems I ignored them and carried on as though she had not spoken. There was no point in encouraging her illusion of independant decision and insight. Anyway, what did I care about her queasy quandary, she who spent half her time moaning about other people's disregard of a sensibility which if it existed she certainly kept well wrapped up, and the other half groaning because the moon was not on sale in prepacked slices at the local supermarket.

And yet this slick dismissal troubles me, when I think of her messy openended life and my own, how similar they are. And how we will both die without having brought to life that firmness and solemnity that we both in our different jargons expressed a wish for. If I saw her hangups as the comic corns and carbuncles of personality a clown displays, it was only because my own were a little more sophisticated, less strikingly inane because less easily grasped at one glance. But that this infinitely insignificant distinction should have led me to disparage her and gloat over my own magnificent struggles, this was sicker and more petty than anything she ever perpetrated. It is this realization which is perhaps ultimately most depressing, when it rules, that that fat and stupid bitch of a mindless shopper veering from one brand of washing

powder to another is made up of the same failures, the same frustrations and the same desires as any spiritual sufferer you care to identify with. She will curse the crowds and rude assistants and dream of a centrally heated cafeteria with fitted bingo and television, he will fulminate against death and the disinterest of a self sufficient universe and dream of a world which camouflages itself against the colour of his thoughts and whose constant invention is nevertheless restrained from mindless waste and pain. But choose whatever metaphors you like, the game is the same, and though virtuous superiority and the assumption of an aristocracy of the spirit is good for morale it leaves you nowhere in the long run, if you are unfortunate enough to need other people's lives as raw material for your own.

And yet why should I have been respectful of her itchy perplex simply because it was as real and valid as my own in some ultimate resort? At least I did not deceive myself that these matters were soluble, at any rate in the warm house and all friends together sense she believed in. I knew her house must always have that draught one can never quite trace, that her friends would never step out of their costumes. I knew she wanted life to be as cosy as death and her friends as safe as memories, and yet remain life and living friends. Just because we are all finally in the same boat does not mean that I am going to spend much time on the everything

would be all right if only brigade. And yet, if there were a heaven, it should be a place where one could meet these sordid naggers tripped of the tinsel goals and petty worries in which they clothed their ache, meet them and recognize that appalling still sadness which is the only human soul that deserves to survive.

Anyway, by the time we reached my room again we had arranged that she would be staying in town while I went off to work on the pea harvest for a month, after which I would come back and collect her and we would take off into the blue. We had no definite place in mind, but in the thin air and long velvet evenings of the summer town such mundane considerations seemed incidental. Things would arrange themselves, as indeed they did in the event.

It is curious how events collect themselves at nodes and then clear for a stretch of time. Now, for instance, everything happened at once. Not only in the expected ways arising from the changes in my life, but as if by sympathetic vibration other unrelated possibilities were drawn to happen together, there was a much greater density of events than usual. For instance, I was twice very nearly killed on the road. Once crossing from behind a bus I only noticed the car when it squealed to a halt a yard away from my stick legs, swerving slightly in the last moment of motion like a graceful embellishment after the cadenza. And then on that day out, walking appropriately on the outside of four abreast round a bend

in the still and deserted country road, a car suddenly there at speed frantically swerved to avoid me and I fell in surprise, crouching on the warm tarmac, feeling the scorch where black pellets clung to my whitened skin and watching the driver of the disappearing car shaking his fist out of the window. It was the only vehicle we saw that day.

We went to the deep dead centre of the country, through an isolated landscape of small treelined valleys, in one of which we left the bus and climbed up to the heath of chalk made desolate with heather and stubborn scrub through which the sprawling track wound a way in circles upon itself. It had taken us only a couple of hours, even in the lazy bus, but it was another world altogether from the tedious plains and ethereal abstract downs that I had assumed were all the place had to offer in the way of common. And the weather was almost a parody of summer, the sky an open dome within whose whole and undiluted air we crawled over the crumbling chalk like the chaos of ants I crouched to observe fussing on a patch of moss, in the sudden heat where a huge electric bee steadied itself while selecting the dustiest web of flowers.

In prospect it was the best day I had known for a long time, in experience a heavy brew of excitement and melancholy, spiked with bubbles rising from the swamps of my childhood, where no doubt the coal is even now forming

that will keep me warm in a sentimental old age. We reached a bluff of sheer rock topped and tailed with thick woods, the faulted face of a little valley, green and lush as the heath behind us was barren, where a river ran along, disappearing in a screen of trees at either end. It was a private vale of pasture sunk into the chalk with even a few cows chewing and gazing round in the contemplative manner approved by landscape painters. What made it completely delightful was the strange junction of two railway lines in the middle of this rural wilderness, with signals and points and the rails leading to God knows what conurbations utterly unconnected with this security, this quiet and useless valley.

The group spread out, some climbing trees or down the rock, others lolling about in smooth crevices and hollows on the ledge of stone. The girl and I took ourselves off for a stroll, but she was not happy for long away from the others and I certainly did not want to appear isolationist just then. On the other hand I had very little interest in or experience of communal activities, though I did my best to feign the sort of easygoing unoriginal mentality which is required if ten people are to pretend to have but a single thought. And so the afternoon passed away. I left them once and went exploring through the dingy old trees overhanging the cliff, down a chimney in the rock, only realizing afterwards that I could quite easily have fallen and broken

my neck, and dashing madly through the trees below, recovering with no difficulty the sagas I had spun myself as a child let loose on Sunday afternoons in a glen of trees and deep cut stream near our house. But the blood warmth of this recovery was accentuated by a chill in the air, close and hot, which I felt in my attempts to mingle facelessly with the others. All I asked was to be ignored, but unless it was simply my neurosis distributing its own doubts among the bit players then these were constantly aware of me, as of a slight headache. I knew that at least two of the men had their meek eyes on my girl, and I knew too that she was torn between her affections general and particular. And while I thought I knew which were which now, in the pockets of empty mood during the afternoon I could see how very easy it would be for her to fuse the two, and cut me out. And so I went off for a time, to be with my old certainties again and leave her free to do as she liked. She could go and suck eggs, I wasn't going to play games with her. Didn't she realize who I was? All right then, others did, and even if they didn't I certainly made up for their ignorance. I was an original leather bound hand sewn genius, an exquisite sensibility, that's what I was, a law unto himself, an untamed volcano of a personality, a still pool of tranquillity with cosmic dust in my eyes and a redhot turd in my underpants. What care I for the something somethings of the timid something crowd? What, more to the

point, was I doing romping through the woods so green like a retarded spastic in heaven, dismantling homemade replicas of people who scared me? There was only one way to face them and that was to face them, face to faceless face, sitting even now just over that ridge, real and substantial and twice as large as the life they led. What if I did feel like a virtuoso told that music has been banned as useless and why doesn't he learn a trade? Belittling what scared me was no way out. I should be able to live a half normal life for Christ's sake it's all this going off by yourself makes you weird.

I pulled myself over the ridge of earth by gripping a handlehold tree root and strolled down to the smooth baths of solid rock where the rest of them lay soaking in the unwavering sunshine. And as she greeted me with a delayed and slightly manufactured smile I realized what was strange in their treatment of me. It was simply that while their tone with each other was one of continual meaningless insult and innuendo, to me they were nothing other than unfailingly polite, with the fractionally more determined intonation with which one speaks to the foreigner, a nice bloke but not too hot on the language. They were putting themselves out for me. And no reaction in all my stock from pity and contempt to admiration and fear could close that chink.

We lay stunned and sleek as seals on the rock. Two solemn hikers passed below on the track skirting the

foot of the cliff. They plodded by in their sturdy anoraks and khaki shorts leading to khaki legs bulging with muscle and stuffed into thick socks, coils of rope over their shoulders. One of the girls gave them a long languorous wolf whistle, and we all fell about laughing as the serious spectacled face turned and scanned the heights for this strange birdie. And my girl looked at me laughing and touched my arm for the first time unprompted, saying joyfully she's such a scream. And later on, when our own climbers had returned and we were all dozy with rest, the steady forgotten humming of insects and heat suddenly focused and intensified, we looked round curiously, unable to decide whether it was very near or very distant, when a huge diesel locomotive appeared out of the trees and sidled coyly up to the signal, murmuring passionately. We sat entranced by this visit from the outside world. The engine serenaded the signal with an anguished howl which set the cows on heat but left the signal unmoved, and soon we had included this louder bass in the orchestra of the valley. So that it came as a shock when for no apparent reason the signal lifted with a loud clack and the amorous diesel moaned and groaned away into the pit of the woods again. With the plug pulled out of the sounding valley we all at once felt heavy and redundant, decided the day was over and it was time to be getting back. The sky was still clear and bright as we turned once more up the slight rise on to the heath,

but the sun had fallen flat and its light passed straight through between the layers of air without warming them. We found we had exhausted ourselves with rest after the walk coming, and now the tumble track was long and tedious, our journey only a tiresome necessity. And when we overtook two hikers stepping at a planned pace through the heather I think only I noticed the face beneath the spectacles and growth of beard unshaven, the lower jaw drawn out to one side opening a crack between the lips where the liquor of his mouth seeped out.

When we reached the bus stop it had grown chilly and we were cold waiting in our light summer clothing, were cold and tired all the long journey home. And falling asleep on my shoulder she was personal and secret at last, it was I she chose to support her as she dived into dreams where the bumps and jolts of the bus became shock waves reaching down into that enveloping buoyancy where we all live again as fish do, the brief walk from one bus to another in some dreary market town already overcast, she winced at the light like a child, and when in the final cold coach she relapsed into herself she left behind enough, her head in my arms, her hand on my knee, to let me know she depended on me to keep the world at bay, and to make it easy for me to do so. I had her safe at last, and if it was only cold and darkness and delay I had to deal with it was simple. I chuckled inly with pleasure at the solidity of it all, my back to a wall secure at

last.

When the bus pulled into town it was almost dark, and raining. I wakened her up gently and we ran with her friend the mouse down the streaming promenade and into the damp smelly silence of our house, where I left them and burst into my own dim room with the pleasure of homecoming that never palls.

That was it, I did not see her again before going out to work. I found it difficult at first to get used to her dating system, only seeing each other in patches, but I could not very well force her to spend more time with me than she wished. I persuaded myself that this was only another habit I must love out of her, but at times I wondered if any such habit could have survived the needs of a really strong affection, and if she was not merely making sure I remained a part time partner.

When I woke the next morning it was to a clatter on the panels of someone else's door, then the someone else I remembered was me and somehow I became responsible for this weak and flabby body propped on one elbow whose door was being knocked at. I was now together, hastily patched up with bits of dream still sticking out here and there but I made it to the door, tucked a dressing gown around me and opened it. And there you stood, calm and firm in that cream minicoat, your face at once tender and distant. I stood for a moment, catching up. Can I come in, you asked, rather sharply, as if the question now had

meaning. I muffed my way through a comic hangover sequence and closed the door behind you. You stood in the urine light from the thick curtains and the room and my appearance seemed a calculated shabbiness, trying to prove something. You looked round carefully, searching I suppose for the hidden girl. Said you had just come over to collect the things you had left from time to time, a few books, some makeup, the check nightdress. I mumbled something about sleeping late and started to dress. I was desperately embarrassed and kept up a hearty manner. You were very cool, turning away to pull a jersey from the drawer as I put on my jeans. I pulled back the curtains on the vicious brightness outside, opened the window to let in the air and street noise. Your manner was that I had known you use to strangers, but brittle, unnatural as my own which I also used with certain people but never before you, become one of them. This was the real agony of it all, that we were denied our ability to talk freely at the very moment when we both needed it so desperately, to try and explain, understand. At the time when I most wanted to take hold of you and make you see that it was not you I was leaving, not this you that stood silent and hurt before me, or at least to know the extent of your pain, at this moment I was reduced to the harsh false pretence that nothing unusual had happened, seeming for lack of words a cold and heartless hypocrite to your eyes.

Ah how sick I am of this fucking subjectivity, this

selfness, this eternal maundering inconclusive irrelevant I. I, I, I, this faceless consciousness in whom I have not the least interest, who is only bearable when lived precisely as the translucent I in whom there is nothing but what echoes the reality outside. But this objective review of a subjective process, how ironic that I who have always hated and loathed the sterility of introspection should now be trapped by the paradoxes of self in the search not for me, for I do not exist, but you, who exist only too much. And though when I think about it I can see no other way but this laborious construction of a polyhedron, in the hope that the shape of the long vanished concentric circle may be caused to appear between my crude attempts at its perfection, yet whenever I wish to reproduce some scene which my mind still sheers away from, some scene like this morning meeting whose incredible simplicity and equally incredible complexity of association and echo can still stop me dead in my life, as when groping in a pocket one feels among the hard enduring things the sudden fragility of a loose cigarette, when I turn from that spontaneous and unaffected emotion to these crippled gestures it seems nothing but obscenity, this reasoning, the laborious commentary to a forgotten masterpiece. I can only hope that when I at last reach the end, an end of this sad and wonderful history, I can laugh and throw it aside, turning away to the only reality which can compete with it on its own terms. And yet I do not know,

for what are those terms? If I persue it as art it evades me as life, when I seek to smother it in life will it not stare back with the disinterested perpetuity of art?

Only if I can confound its design with my representation of it and then outlive it too will I be free, and even then I do not know if it is not too late. If you pause to hold the door open for someone you must expect their shadow to fall on your stepping feet.

I muttered something about making breakfast, coffee, and retired behind the partition that enclosed the cooker and the sink. Do you know what time it is, you asked. No. A quarter to twelve. I lit the gas under the kettle. There was silence in the room. Then you said, I called round here yesterday, I stood out there on the landing for half an hour banging on the door, why didn't you let me in? I was out all day, I replied calmly. Out, out where? I was out with the girl, we went out to the country for the day, with her friends. A moment of silence. Then I heard what I supposed was you crying. When you spoke again it was convulsively, in little spurts. Out in the country. I thought you were in here with her and you wouldn't let me in, I stood out there and I knew you were in here and just let me stand there banging the door and calling. You never took me out. You never went out with me.

The kettle boiled. I poured water on to the brown powder and watched a lump of undissolved coffee turn black

and circle on the surface. I wanted to go to you, but I could not face the scene waiting on the other side of the plasterboard wall. I touched the cup, my fingers stuck slightly to the hot china.

You don't really think I would have left you standing out there, do you? There was no reply, and I realized at once that there could never again be a reply to such a question. I took the coffee cup and strode round the partition. You were sitting on the bed, arms on your knees, staring with liquid eyes at the window. I held the cup out to you, you took it after a while and put it on the floor. I wanted to say something, to touch you, to explain that I was not the sort of person you thought, the sort of person I had to appear, that I did not mean to hurt you, but then I got confused by the fact of you being there and hurried back behind the screen.

There was silence. Then you suddenly said, if only I was going to have your child, at least that would be something of you to keep back. You paused, then continued in the same perfectly natural voice, suddenly realizing all these things, it would be better if you had died.

I said nothing, just stood tight hoping you would soon collect yourself. I said nothing, why? Because I was a man of principle. Because I felt all the pity in me wheedling me to go to you and take you in my arms and hold you, and because I knew that would be false I did

nothing. I did not love you, I had decided to leave you and the more completely I cut myself off the better. To comfort you with an affection I no longer believed it would be despicable, an insult to you, for you surely wanted my love not my pity, and since I could not give that I would give nothing. It's a great thing, logic, and yet was I wrong? Would you have been helped by a spurious kindness whose hollowness you would have detected at once? And if so, would that have made it right for me to pander to you, only delaying the pain? Fucking ethics, fucking, fucking mental masturbation and filth. Right, wrong, who gives a shit? I did it like that, and if it happened again I should do it again and again and again. There is no lesson, no moral except that kindness and affection are the exceptions to which there is no rule. When I think of these last days my mind goes to pieces they excite such unspeakable emotion in me, and all that turbulence can find no outlet, no use. I can neither justify nor condemn myself, only observe, writhing, the inevitable sequence of actions, and leave all the stifled pity to fester at the back of my tight little thick ugly stupid mind. Yes, I know that this self vilification is only another easy way out, but I do not believe in it any more than in anything else. And what does it all matter beside the simple irredeemable fact of your sitting on my bed that morning and forcing your hard banal common sense, of which you were so proud, forcing it to cover and deny

the uncomprehending pain of your soft and wonderful love, forcing it to conceal that tender fragile sympathy we had both forgotten about and which returned now, puzzled and hurt like the child whose legs have been blown away by a bomb and who lies in the arms of his helpers with huge startled eyes, to embarrass us, as the child embarrasses the generals in their clear world of sorties and morale.

At last there was silence in your room. You had succeeded in the struggle. I came round and lit a cigarette, offered you one. Then I saw what you had done, and nearly called out, so precise a gesture was it. In a window box on a stand we had planted some seeds when I moved into the flat, and these had recently put out tentative little shoots, several dozen of them. And now they lay all uprooted, not flung in the fireplace or anything dramatic, simply plucked up and left lying beside the earth they had clutched out, their white roots broken and exposed. I just stood and stared. You were standing by the window, turned and went over to the chest of drawers where you took out the remaining clothes and stuffed them into a shopping bag you had with you. There was no room for the books so I said I would bring them over when I came to collect my things from your place. You said that was fine. You had fully recovered now. You apologised for making a fuss, I said no not at all and showed you to the door. We agreed that I would come for my

things the following afternoon.

I turned the lock on your descending footsteps and strolled back into the room, feeling nothing but relief that this uncalled for assault on my feelings was over.

Do you know, love, when I think of us now I cannot understand how you could ever have loved someone as ugly as I. I don't mean physically ugly or even inherently evil, I mean the hideous mess, the squalid juxtapositions, the inadequacy, the helplessness, the tepid confusion of arrogance and humility. I am losing hope of ever reconciling myself to this, let alone anyone else. I remember one day we were out walking I said in jest that the only reason I was faithful to you was that no one else could ever put up with me, and after a moment you said you thought that was probably true. And for all I know it is. Or I am confined to the company of those, like she who feeds and feels me now, who are tone deaf. I am growing tired, love, of these painful memories and of myself above all and the dreary reiterated present in which I move. I must try and not be maudlin though, for tomorrow the sun will no doubt be shining and all well, a glorious future unrolling like wallpaper. I have no certainty to guide me, not even that one, and it is this which at once sabotages any attempt at contact with others and makes my own company intolerable to me.

The following afternoon was dull when I left the house, dull as I made my way across town with a stack of

incomprehensible books under my arm. The simultaneity of spatially separated events. Dead time and the quench unit. The lifetime of excess carriers. On the aberration of light from stars. I trotted through the mosaic hall and opened the glass panelled door, without knocking. I never knocked. The strange reverberations of familiar furniture in an alien set. Just inside, in the drab living room, you sat silent beside your two flat-mates watching television, turning to me with surprise and a pleasure no longer sure of itself, timid. And yet how natural and unaffected was your every gesture, every emotion coming untampered to your face. In contrast with my cracked tones. The pussies looked at me with their usual ironical greeting smiles. Did they know? We passed through into the bedroom and I got my gear together, there seemed very little of it. What did we say, I have no idea. For a word, one word. But all I can recall is your face, trying so hard to follow the lead I was giving you, of shallow indifference, now darling we're reasonable people after all not savages let's be civilized about this, that pretence which coincided with what you thought you ought to have felt when all you felt really was a horrible unease, a disposition to touch me and say it isn't really true is it? As in a nightmare you know you should protest, this is ridiculous, it's only a dream after all, but somehow the words lodge and grow in the throat, you go on playing by the absurd dream rules and so endorse them.

And so you continued to answer my reasonable comments about arranging this and rearranging that, replying in a hesitant voice but never questioning my right to ignore the fact of your suffering, to deny its existence. All your rights in me I had taken away, and you wanted only to know how far I might grant your requests, how completely and how soon we were going to have to part. For instance, we had arranged to go and visit some friends of yours in the country the coming weekend, had arranged it as long ago as Easter. But now I said I was sorry, I wouldn't be able to make it. And at this you seemed really shocked, perhaps because the rot had not spread that far back, you forgot it was the same me who had accepted in the first place, but when I refused you did not insist. Simply stood like a prisoner being read another new regulation he does not understand but will have to live with, as if it made sense.

I took my things under my arm and said I would be going. You asked if you could come with me to the bus stop. I agreed, of course, of course, anything you like. As long as I could get out of the house and away. And yet I was glad you stayed with me, for all the time we were together I felt besides my fear and revulsion at your emotion a wish to explain it all away, the same incoherent desire to have things out, to clear up this huge misunderstanding that I had felt when you came to see me the morning before. And although I could still find no means

to prove what I felt must be true, that your emotion was unnecessary and wildly in excess of the facts, yet the prospect of parting without anything achieved was blank, and I was glad of a second chance. It was all so unfair. I had only left you because our love had grown old and tired, after all, and yet here you were acting as though I had cut us down in our prime. I had opted for euthanasia and you, your face smoothed with weeping, seemed to charge me with murder. Yet you must have known we were finished anyway, you did know it, you had admitted it by accepting a job abroad. Why then these tears? Why this pain? What had I done to deserve so much mute recrimination?

We went out through the hall and down the slabbed path. I took your arm, knowing I had nothing to fear in the way of faked disinclination. And there was a magical sweetness, the taste of perversion, in holding you with me down the road, in pretending that things were not as they really were. Yet when we reached the stop and sat down side by side on the bench, then when I should have had to do more than simply touch you, when I should have had to look at your eyes too, then I could do nothing, and we sat for ten minutes or more absolutely silent, in the horrible silence we had never known, a mockery of our quietness, the silence of constraint. And nothing I could have done or said would have reflected more accurately the truth of our situation than this lumpy loaded silence we

kept. The sky was grey and there was a chill wind, it was a day fallen back into spring. I looked at you once or twice, trying to show you everything by my expression, but it never got near you, your soft swollen face was packed tight with its own emotion, with the tears dismissed and the choked wishes, absolutely full and impervious. I could only stare at the pavement by your legs, your legs, what had they done to deserve this cruelty and neglect? And at last the bus answered my wish, though it was not without a pang of regret at this new failure that I got in and said goodbye. You did not answer, just stood there looking dumbly at the closing doors. And three blocks later I had forgotten all about you and was looking forward again, as the bus clipped off the dead streets one by one.

And you went off for our looked forward to weekend in the country, alone. Because the people were after all expecting someone to turn up, and because you thought a change of place might help you to find your feet again. I must have agreed to see you off, perhaps you asked me to do so. The situation was clarified even for my befuzzled brain by the fact of your departure for a weekend, alone, to convalesce. And I was again acutely ill at ease as we walked up the street to the bus stop, this time carrying your bag. What I could not imaginatively realise was made fact for me in your going, in my staying. And on that slatted bench I made by first real attempt to say something to you, to explain. I said that I could not express it

properly, which was strictly true, but made it sound mystical and was therefore a lie. And I quoted some lines which came to mind, Jesus help me I quoted you some lines from a book, in French, in French. Even at the time I can remember thinking, surely this will be too much, she must surely scream now, as I sat thoughtfully and dispassionately, rational man trying to talk his way out of a situation where his reason fails him, sitting half turned to you, stumbling over the words I could not pronounce, giving you a running translation of the text, speeding up as I saw the bus approaching two stops away, one, blurting out the words, and you rising to meet the bus with your eyes straight and face firm, as if no extent of lunacy or farce could move you any longer, the limits having been broken anything was possible and would be accepted in the same blank passive manner you had become in order to survive the first and most grotesque absurdity, beside which no other could show.

In the bus we sat silent, I played out, aware vaguely of how very much worse I was behaving than you, how very cheaply. But then it's simply my dionysiac life force seems messy in contrast with her quiescence and inability to adjust. Inability to adjust. And the warmth of your thigh and side pressed against me on the sweaty green seat. I paid. And when we reached the station I walked in under the porch with you, waited while you bought your ticket and then saw you to the barrier. Once

safely the other side of it you turned and said, well goodbye. I said goodbye. And suddenly it was startlingly clear that you were out of reach, not just physically but everywhere. The way you said goodbye was not to the author of your pain but to a kindly friend who had seen you to the station. What you suffered was now totally isolated within you, bound up precisely to avoid the prospect of change, enveloped as an event passed, to die slowly. I no longer came into it. But I turned away, free, a weekend with the girl before me, shot of this sickening emotional hangup and all its useless complications.

With all I have forgotten I still remember you saying afterwards how much you enjoyed that weekend, and at once feeling a prick in my bloated self esteem. I suppose every man really wants the girls he rejects to get them to a nunnery.

The days between have gone, one or all, next is our next meeting. It was one evening, I came round to see you, no doubt after some reverse in the other camp. I found the flat dark and only the blur of a radio upstairs to disturb the silence. On the big polished table was a note in your writing, for the pussies. I'm sitting on Su's baby down at 28 if anyone wants me. I left the note and the house and walked down the freezing clear pavement where shards of flint glinted underneath the street lamps. Up a concrete drive and rang the strange bell. You appeared, looking much better, alive again, surprised and glad to see

me but not unduly so. As we had used to be in fact. I came in and sat down in front of the electric fire where you were ironing. You talked as you worked, about your visit, the people and the house, describing your journey and time there, and very soon I had forgotten all my anxieties and sneaky voices and was simply enjoying you, as much as I had ever done. Perhaps it was the room not ours, perhaps the interval of days which cut away the nightmare between and left us free to behave, for once, naturally again. I was pleased to see you and you to see me, and we showed it.

And then you were standing changing the position of some clothes drying on a rack before the fire, and I had been inspecting the owner's records, and coming back to my chair pushed into your arm reaching for a shirt. You turned and looked at me, I took you in my arms and kissed your hot tender mouth and your eyes and cheeks burning and salty wet. And I do not expect to experience in my life again such a wholly overwhelming moment, your feelings as quick as my own, your need as great and pressing as mine for the simple affection starved all those monstrous weeks, while I fooled around with a puling adolescent who thought of love as a new dress, very nice but what will I look like in it? I knew as I felt the relief and joy not only at our being together but at there being some sense in the world, I knew that I wanted to make love with you and we could and would. So I held you away from me and looked

in at your face broken up with impossible emotions, and said, let's wait till we get home, in case we wake the baby. And so we did, spending the evening before the fire, talking about this and that and making tea. And when the people returned we slipped out and back through the bitterness to our flat, that endless back room where you took off the red sweater and your skirt and I my shirt and jeans and I held you in agony, the soft warmth of your tummy, the swell of your breasts in their crinkly bra, your firm legs and the faint immemorial smell of your loins, from the thighs where you touched me to dust in the sweet hair of our love. And I went with you to the bed and unhooked your bra and palmed your breasts, and made love to you, and made love to you, and made love to you.

And this will stay with me not only for the flight of my body then, nor because in the event it was our last time in bed together. But because for one evening we broke all the rules and escaped from ourselves, the us that had loved shook off the design in which it had no part and, laughing, just did. Yet it was no more, even owed its potency perhaps to the fact that it was only a holiday, a diversion from which I returned to the struggle to batter my way into a new life all the fresher for a good fuck. The trouble with post coitum is not that one is sad, but that one begins once again to think in terms of projects beyond a present used up. Once again we revert to the greasy grapple with a future whose promise veers

between the blank walls of despair and the itching vacuum of hope, but never offers that simple warm immersion in a present moment which is its only justification.

Nearly over. We had used to play tennis together occasionally, one of the few solid interests we had in common. And now my scanning eye picks us up, ascending the long curve of the concrete road leading up to the courts, in a park on the edge of town. It was noon, a blazing hot day. The sounds of cars and other people reached up to us in a blur under the scuff of our own feet and the noise of our breathing, a blur made visible in the haze of heat muddling anything the eye took in from the distance. Wheaten slopes flanking the valley winding up into the county, a knot of trees marking in the far distance the crest of a ridge we had climbed one day, a year before. You were sullen and silent, I oppressed by your intention but refusing to admit I noticed it, trying to take no notice and make it go away, to dismiss it with gay irresponsibility. We reached the squat building and you went to change while I stood looking at my reflection in the polished planking and at the loose hopeless curves of the downs lolling in the sun beyond the sheet of windows. Then you appeared, as if to a room full of people, in your short white tennis skirt and blouse, your hair done up in two bunches with rubber bands. Green and yellow rubber bands, very thin. I smiled, but you went on looking nervous, though we were alone in the pavillion. We

went out and down over the cricket pitch to the courts. I took your arm and you let me hold it, limply, without interest.

And we played our game, sweating in the empty heat. I muffed my shots and gagged and gurgled and grouched through the game, desperately pushing out a stream of nonsense and gaiety against the dull disinterest of your flushed and sombre face, and the sheaved bunches of hair bobbing about as you leapt and ran, your legs pink and strong. And I thought then how beautiful you were, but as one thinks dispassionately of the drawing or photograph of a stranger. I thought you beautiful and myself lucky to be with you, but something came between, some deeper prohibition, a paralysis of emotion. Not for the first time it occurred to me that I might suffer, might regret leaving you, and that there was nothing I could do to prevent it. Because I had opened up a new dimension in my life, and that had to be explored, and while I could not be sure that it would replace you, I could never be sure that it would not. And I realized then that this whole matter was now in fact outside my control. For if I dropped everything and went back to you, our life would be fouled by my perpetual curiosity as to what it would have been like, that other path. I had started something that myself would not allow myself to leave undone.

We walked back to the pavillion, I carrying my racket on your side so as not to have to take your limp

arm again. We bought some beer and ate the packed lunch you had made for us, egg sandwiches, two tomatoes, a bag of broken crisps. And we ate in silence. Afterwards, smoking a cigarette before going back, I tried to place in words what I had realized about it all, the fatality, being beyond my control, hence the inability to feel responsible. But I fell silent after a couple of sentences. It sounded so trite, as if I were trying to justify what I knew was unjustifiable, what should not need justification. And I began to feel irritated with you, who had not spoken a word, for making me justify myself, for sitting there silent and smug and leaving me to fumble for speech, for keeping up this banal act of silent suffering and imposing it selfishly on me. What right had you to make it difficult for me when I was going out of my way to make the break gentle? Most men would simply have walked out, yet here was I still coming to see you, agreeing to play tennis with you when I could have been on the beach, and you doing your best to make it miserable. Was that generous?

I looked at you. You were staring at me and crying, without any sound, just tears swelling out round your huge open eyes and running down over your cheeks as you sat opposite me, the paper wrapping from our sandwiches on the table between, with the beer glasses and crumbs, and on the chair beside you your bag and clothes, your racket in its press. The sunlight lit a huge rectangle

on the wooden floor, but did not reach us where we sat. I looked away, awkward and furious, wanting to weep and whisper to you, to dissolve into the air, wanting the happy ending I had within my power and could not bring myself to use. And so I sat, hard and abstracted, and let you cry silently in that empty room, utterly alone. That's all.

Then you got out a handkerchief and wiped your face and blew your nose, and we got up and went back down the winding road. And about all the frustrated tenderness and dying love I could feel my amazement that you gave me no grip, no false note of anger or melodrama, no excuse to harden my feelings against you, only the purity of a naked love such as I had never imagined I could inspire, only a depth of emotion I never realized you possessed, only a perfect and cheated love which I never noticed until it was too late to do anything but cruelly and uselessly torture me, shut away behind the drawn blinds of myself.

And what were we up to in there, inside the wall eyed room? Going round and round and round, sniffing arses. She did not like my odour it seemed, grew touchier and touchier. And as I lay on the beach every day and tanned I passed the point where I really cared any longer whether she stayed with me or took off in search of herself or some other fiction. I became gradually abstracted from myself, watching life as a mime which caught distantly

at my attention, but left me intact in a head swimming with heat and coconut oil fumes. The oil I used to borrow from an acquaintance, a lifeguard on the beach, and glistening with it lay a slimy dollop on the harsh pebbles day after day, with less and less inclination to do anything or interest in anything but the ethereal vacuum of that summer opening day after day like a dish of mussels, each identical and perfect. She met me on the beach now and then, one day with three of her student friends, of whom one started insulting her, calling her a silly moo and ridiculing her ideas. I was vaguely aware that she expected me or whatever bloke she happened to be with to spring to her defence, but I simply hadn't the energy, could only lie there, yawn and grin inanely. I agreed with all the bugger was saying anyway. So she packed up and left, saying she had work to do. That evening when I asked her about it she rather too carefully denied remembering the incident. This sort of automatic sealing off of anything she did not like was one of the things I was finding a drag. She was a lovely child, a lovely fat moo, but she would insist on being taken seriously. And then her flatmate the mouse apparently loathed me. I told my girl it was only maddened sexual desire, but she was not amused. She felt responsible for liking someone her flatmate loathed. And the more I dismissed her flatmate as a flatulent flatchested bitch the more strained she became. Already realizing, no doubt, that she was not so

much in love with me as with the picture of me she had taken at that party upstairs, a picture I spat on with every word.

But on the beach nothing mattered very much. And then one day I found a note slid under my door. You reminded me that one day during the winter you had asked me to accompany you to an allnite party some rich acquaintances of yours gave annually on midsummer night. I had agreed at the time, it being quicker than refusal and midsummer unthinkably remote, and now you requested, as a favour, not having anyone else to ask, your due. How could I say no? I'm not that kind of slob. I'm another kind of slob.

It was the last time we went out together, and so I suppose this fiasco will have to stand as finale. I had not slept the night before, and on the beach that day dozed off, waking to a low sun and every movement of my body a violent sheet of pain. What my oily comrade had not told me was that while coconut oil will tune up an established tan very nicely, its effect on white skin is precisely that of cousin Olive on sausages. I was, for the first time in my life, truly and comprehensively sunburnt. To which my tiredness and the long exposure while asleep to sunlight filtered through the evil afternoon haze had added a muzzy brain and a queasy belly. My only desire was to climb into bed, slowly, and have the band play sweet music. As it was I had the prospect of a

twelve hour orgy to the depressing noise of people enjoying themselves. By the time I had climbed up the steps from the beach to the promenade my only consideration was whether or not I would be able to endure long enough even to make a show of having a good time, not, above all, to prevent you doing so. Every step involved the rubbing of inflamed skin on my arms, stomach, chest, thighs and the inside of my legs, calves and ankles. Changing out of my trunks and into my underpants took me twenty minutes of advanced masochism, since the least inclination from the vertical caused my helpless muscles to give and my body to topple slowly, in time with my yells as I saw what was coming, and collapse on knees and hands, overdone skin rasping on the carpet. About the time the people below started thumping their ceiling with a broomstick I had my shirt on. My trousers I managed lying on my back on the bed with my legs up on the wall and a towel between my teeth. You had told me that suits were the order of the day, if not indeed evening dress, but having neither the one nor the other I blew on my jacket and looked for a tie. It was only then, with ten minutes to go, that I remembered I had used the only tie I possessed to bind up a dripping tap in the sink. So out I went to borrow one from a friend, a journey which left me, by the time I rounded the corner for home again, on that astral plane that people undergoing torture are said to attain, where nothing matters any more and the pain like everything else

recedes to a distance unconnected with oneself. I was halfway up the stairs, and I now know exactly what stairs mean to the infirm, when you came dashing after me into the entrance hall and I turned slowly, overbalanced and fell down two steps, hanging on to the banister and screaming. You rushed up and grabbed my arm, at which I cried fuck and nipped my tongue. Then we hobbled out past the open door of the flat below, where a shocked granny with a child at each hip glared at us. I told her not to worry, she'd be old herself one day. Outside was the blissful car we shared with two more party goers, and once inside I recovered sufficiently to give you a run down of the situation.

But you were in your debutante mood that evening, and such things as sunburn or tiredness did not figure in that world of Ambre Solaire and interior sprung mattresses and mistresses. Not that you were unsympathetic, but you had drowned your kittenish emotions and put on the dress of society and civilization, prepared for this evening of the life you felt was yours and for which you were born. You had dropped the untouchable coolness that usually went with this, though, perhaps not to presume on the oddity of our situation. But whatever the reason I felt truly present to you, not merely in attendance. And I? All I was aware of was pain and apprehension, as I surveyed the white dickyed and bowtied driver and his laquered consort, and your unaccustomed though unobtrusive preparation and

the big leathery car that swept us along through the warm evening, all I felt was a desperate social and physical inadequacy, and hoped to God I would be able to control myself long enough not to disgrace you.

We finally reached the big house and I began again the wounding act of movement. It was only when we got inside and hung up our coats that I realized to what trouble you had been. A white ankle length evening gown was all you wore, set off with a single necklace and your face and hair. In my dream condition I thought how impossibly beautiful you looked. Who is she? And then I remembered, and remembered you sewing the dress together in the evenings when I had used to live with you. We entered the main room through a doorway where an ultraviolet spotlight announced the guests in a modern version of the footman, and I thought how it summed up everything about you that while this effect made every other woman who walked into it look like a soap powder advertisement, it transformed you into a column of light your flesh and hanging hair proclaimed a woman. And it was not just my biased eyes you drew, there were plenty of other men there who saw how your taste and beauty showed up all the other women at that crummy party for the bandaged whores they were. Something that has only occurred to me since is that plenty of girls I know would have taken me along that evening and then ditched me violently and to my face in favour of any one of the admiring males around, after what I had done to you.

Yet such was my faith in what I can only call your charity that it never even crossed my mind then. Such, perhaps, was your faith in me, until I showed you a thing or two.

And so we staggered on from drink to drink and room to room of that hideous piece of modernity. Of course I should never have gone within smelling distance of alcohol in my condition, but as we hardly knew anybody there and dancing was out of the question there was really very little else to do. And it did take my mind off things. Indeed, about midnight I woke up sufficiently to quite enjoy myself, in the relative quiet of a room with food, and although you could hardly be expected to overlook my inadequacy on this one day you had looked forward to for so long, you were never anything but kind and undemanding. All you asked was that we should stay, as the host provided breakfast for those still able to crawl the following morning and this excited your imagination, and indeed what remained of mine. The breakfast itself would probably be greasy and horrible, but there was something romantic in the idea of raving until dawn, dining off morning plates and then rushing home to bed. And in this euphoria I reconsidered practically my whole strategy of breaking off with you, you who were so lovely and gentle and witty and patient. I remember the marvelous flow of warm blood around my heart as I thought what a wonderful ending that would be, what a wonderful

beginning, as we would be all the richer for having realized what we meant to each other. I thought of the other girl, watched her figure become ground to yours, a brief episode in the development of our drama. Which was starting again now, here in this lurid evening. And although I was far too wary of myself to speak of this to you, nevertheless I am sure you caught the hint from my affection, greater than any evening but that one out of time, when we shortcircuited our tearing egos.

We wandered on to a balcony over a hall where a beat group was freaking while four huge loudspeakers stared impassively over their shoulders. I sat propped up against your shoulder and watched the dancers trapped in the warp of solid sound that turned the air to coloured plastic. I thought of the white maggots spilling out when once I kicked open the body of a dead rabbit, the ceaseless activity fascinating in detail and incomprehensible in design.

We left them to it, I acutely aware that my walk would suggest I was either ruptured or dying for a slash, on through galleries of mirrors and people mirrored, myriad atomic structures circling, forming, disintegrating with a sudden release of energy, see you again I hope you must must meet are you going to the. Told everybody that I was absolutely dying, well I mean, I wasn't, not really. I can hardly ever get away that's the nuisance of it, and then it's only to hunt balls, well they're so corny you

have no conception, it's such a yell. Well by any rational criteria. As far as I'm concerned she's two legs and the space between you know what I mean? The original bint with the hole in the middle, yes, I know, but the trouble is she seems to think. I respect him, I don't revere him. So I said well what do you think it is, dripping? Let's see if we can prevail on Peter to give us his opinion, Peter, have you any idea. Has anybody got a smoke, I mean a smoke, you know? Who is that man? Who is that woman in white? Well for Jesus sake, where is everybody?

We barged through, collecting various drinks on the way, and found ourselves amongst the crush where the beat group was. Someone seized you by the arm, I lost sight of you. It was no great shock, I had been expecting this all evening. In a way it came as a curious relief, the strain was off and I could stop worrying, stop trying to compete, perhaps even find a quiet place somewhere and go to sleep. A body knocked me and I fell, unable to compensate in time for the new balance required, my fall broken through a forest of legs to the floor, on which I lay and then crawled like a baby, arse in the air from the room. Outside the air was freer, without the steel springs of the music, and I got to my feet via the wall. I hobbled off through a convergence of corridors where everyone was, a room where two men were throwing books at each other, the deserted and stained supper room, up a spiral

staircase spiralling up, a man in black who said jolly good and then he said jolly good again, up, to a dome, to a room entirely filled with cushions, on which I flung myself. At last I had found what I had been searching for all night. I closed my eyes and was very tired indeed. My second brief burst of energy had quite gone and now, at three in the morning, I was totally unfitted for any more exposure to people or places. I wanted go sleepy byes. But as long as the room remained quiet, with only a loving couple necking in the corner, all was well.

And then after a while the door opened and you came in, alone, stood and looked down at me. I smiled sleepily. You came over, sat down beside me and took my hand. Why did you go away, you said, I might never have found you again in this place. I didn't want to disturb you, I said. But I wanted to be disturbed, I wanted you to disturb me. I nodded. You licked a smear of beer on your wrist. Anyway, you said. And tucked your head down on my shoulder, so that I smelt your hair in breathing.

All at once a square of light opened in the wall, a window, a painting, a vision of palm trees and breaking surf, the melting wax of electric guitars trickled into the air and a voice announced Hawaii land of Geisha Girls, land of Van Gogh, outpost of empire, at which the door opened and a pack of cooing idiots with women to match entered crying with one voice and that not their own, ah a film how lovely. Looking over my shoulder I located a

diabolic torch casting this spell over the room, which quickly jammed with people sitting on the floor, snatching cushions from each other, lining the walls, a few hanging like bats from the ceiling. If you've ever asked yourself what palmleaf underclothing feels like, said the soundtrack, you're barking up the wrong tree because the native boys and girls are just like us in that respect, it all started with a bluff sailor named Captain Cook, a lanky cunt with tones aged in wood sat down in my lap and bayed at his mate. I struggled up and held your hand all the way to the door. Just outside we met the couple who had brought us. They had been looking simply everywhere for us, they were going home now were we coming? I looked at you. You told them we were going to stay for breakfast. Oh yes, fine, they said, we just thought we ought to ask you because you know the first bus isn't till half past ten. You nodded and looked at me for confirmation. And I hesitated. Partly because my mind was suffering from a time lag between impression and comprehension, and partly because I was trying to envisage the horrors attendant on staying, so as to control them. I hesitated in fact just long enough to make it necessary for you to ask me if that was all right, or if I would rather go. I asked a few stupid questions, are you really going? is there no bus before then? But all I could see was the intolerable contrast between going home now in a swift comfortable car to the bed and quiet and sleep I craved, and remaining in

this nightmare wilderness of pain and noise for a further six hours followed by an uncertain cold slow return. This and the shock and distress in your face as you realized that I was not going to stay, that I wanted to leave now, and that things being as they were, there was nothing you could do about it. The couple shuffled and consulted the air. Well, are you coming or staying, they asked. I looked at you guiltily and said, Could you stay by yourself? You turned quickly and said, Come on, we'll go with you. Turned to keep your face from me, and mine from you.

We walked down the stairs and got our coats. I felt hideous, vile, utterly despicable. And I had so much wanted to give you a really good evening out, for my sake as much as yours. You sat silent in the car, while I whispered my explanations, how it was not me but my body had quit, my exhaustion and flayed skin and weakness and nausea. But I knew how horribly selfish it must sound, to spend all day on the beach with my new friends and get burnt, on this of all days, to hit you again just when you were trying to get up after the first blow. I thought of you and of the tall strong civilized men who belonged to your world, who were even now at the party, really living, who had evening dress and knew how to treat a girl properly, who were fit partners to go out with and share your bed and your life. I could only agree to every charge and curse the insane combination of sleeplessness and sunstroke, the idiot chance that had left me unable even

to feign such qualities and thus make up in this respect the appalling injuries I had done you in others. Handed this one precious chance of a healing I had not only failed, but scratched my filthy name in the wound.

Back at the flat I fell straight into bed and asleep, hopelessly aware, as I sensed you taking off the long white dress, of the final irony, that on this one night when we needed as never before the spell of the flesh to make everything right I could not bear even the sheets against my skin without shivering. You took the other damp bed and, I hope, went quickly to sleep, for the only place I can hope for any welcome from you now my love is in your dreams.

When I woke the next morning your bed was open and cold, you had gone. I got dressed and left that dreary house for the last time. Nor did I ever see you again.

These last weeks are veined thick with unreality, for the prominence of my meetings with you, and in particular the morning you came to see me, the evening we made love, the game of tennis and that party, the intolerable intensity of emotion burning from these black lamps completely obliterates the particular stretch of time in which they were placed. I cannot remember what separated them or often what caused them, I cannot even be sure whether the sequence in which I remember them is an order of events or of the mind, for they have rather the force of stories invented to scare children than of things which might

actually happen to somebody. All relation to time not then has been dismissed, I am left only with these four terrible facts which, like a bad hurt, the face slashed with a razor blade, caused at the time so much real pain as the sickening fear at harm done to oneself and the expectation of pain to come, an expectation amply fulfilled. For if any one thing in this world is certain that I will never completely erase the scars that those weeks have left on me. And indeed I am not sure that this attempt at erasure has not simply made a worse mess.

But the peculiar thing is that when I think of these things, of the things I did to you and of your pain, the image which expresses with most pungency these moments is not any of them, is not even connected with this time. It was one day during our summer holiday, in that foreign city. We had had an argument over some trivia that our mood made big. And I suddenly stood up while you were talking and started to walk away. I was furious and sick at the sight of you and the whine of your petulant voice. Before I had gone very far I heard you call my name, then running footsteps. You slowed and walked beside me. I took absolutely no notice of you except to walk a little faster. You said nothing, just walked beside me, not touching me or asking me to say anything to you, just being there. I crossed a side street, ignoring you as though you were a stranger who just happened to be there beside me. And then as you grew unable to keep pace with me I

heard you fall behind and we walked on down that dusty baking boulevard, your footsteps sounding just behind me as I walked on, eyes before me and face drawn tight. And your footsteps gradually mingled with those of the other people on the pavement and I forgot everything but my pride and my anger and my isolation, and when I reached the end of the street and could not help looking back, you were no longer there.

Nor did I ever see you again. So wouldn't it be quicker and better simply to draw a line? The rest, let us say, is silence. But of course it is not and was not and never will be in this life. The rest is calling and crying and whining and watching feathers move. But first there are the routine moves to be completed, for unlike chess masters we never resign, always play out the half an hour's life that remains.

You left town a week after that party, and when the news finally reached me I felt nothing but relief. At last it was all over. My own days before leaving I spent in the same headless fashion, beach, lunch, beach, dinner, pub. The girl and I settled to a steady routine, not trying anything new with each other, just chugging along. I gave up trying to join in her group games and looked forward to the holiday when I would trap her crowdless on some unlikely isle and beat her pretty head in. And so on without pause to the day when I packed up my meagre possessions, cleared out the heap of yellow newspapers behind the chaise longue, returned my key to the landlord and left, kissing her goodbye and would see her in a month. I think she too was relieved rather than any-

thing else to see the back of me. There were too many corpses and frustrated attempts cluttering our one up one down arrangement in that heartless sunny street.

The day, as always when I leave this town for the summer, was a masterpiece. The sea jostled about its version of the overripe sun, a tense field of light in a blue ground. The beach was dotted with lucky loungers, the streets airy and full of people going. I got off my bus at the station and walked in under the hollow shadow of its massive roof. Put my holdall on the rack and settled, trying to forget the ache of leaving in the routine travel kit of magazine and cigarette. But I could not. And then a little way outside the station the train suddenly stopped dead, the absolute silence of electric trains at rest poured into the carriage. Outside the dusty window I could see the curves and lines of the town falling out to the delicate sparkling sea. It was very warm in the carriage. An airplane had left a long white trail furred over the skyblue, the downs dissolved into their own heat, a red bus crawled up a road above where we had used to live, in the spring. The air was still. The man sitting opposite coughed and lit a cigarette. I looked out, passed through the glass into that empty flat at the other end of town, into the hot dusty streets, the red brick, the junk shops, the corner of a poster peeled back from its hoarding, the silence, the silence. And then the train wonderfully started to move, it was gone,

I was on my way.

It was only during the weeks I spent working on the peas in the fen country that the sense of the town really became clear to me, a sense that my affair with the girl had given me without meaning, as compensation perhaps for the lack of any real heart in our game. The factory itself I already knew, having worked there before coming to town that first summer after school. A block of concrete and asbestos lost in the middle of nowhere, a marshy plain quite flat and featurless, staring it out with the clouded scorching sky. No one came there for pleasure, for money, and left just as soon as they had enough. We lay at night on truckle beds in a mizzen hut the day made an oven, with the clashing hoppers that never stopped and at first light the screech and boom of fighters from a nearby air base. And so I began to earn our holiday, shovelling pea waste into bins amid the blaring heat and the slanging of the machinery.

I got a couple of letters from her, shifty oil and water concoctions, a mass of heartless idle chatter with gobs of sentiment floating in it. She urged me to keep at the job and gave me the latest about the fun people. But for all their flaws her letters were in their very indifference a powerful reminder of the town, its stony heat by day and the evenings woven from pure dark colours, the noisy rabble in the pub we used to frequent and all the undemanding extroversion of that life. In my drab

provincial exile, a mile to the bungalow shop and two to the main road and the pub, I felt it very strongly, that sea and sun and freedom. And in this mood I wrote not to her but to you, a letter made up of my feelings and at least some attempt to explain, to hope that we might remain friends. You did not reply, at any rate I suppose not, for by the time a reply was due I had left.

I lasted the absurd dull life just over a fortnight. All that time I was made to realize every moment that unlike my mates on the job I could not parcel out my life in lots, exchanging this for that, these empty weeks for those brimming. I had always lived as if each minute was a thing taken from me, for which I had to account before it went, and how could I possibly justify these wasted days and sleepless nights in terms of a future I knew to be hopelessly unstable? And then there was the railway line, a single track running just past the factory, two trains a day and each of them opportunities missed. I imagined the system of connections and linkages designed to allow me to be lying on that shingle strand in just a few hours, and my strength gave as I saw the afternoon train pull out of the halt by the factory gates and disappear south towards the town where another was waiting, patiently. It was like turning down a considerate offer made in my best interests, day after day.

The final push came one night at the pub. We used to walk the four miles there and back most evenings and

drink vast quantities of small beer to drown the thirst of the day. After a couple of pints I usually ended up at the bar room piano, banging out tunes to which the others sang various obscene lyrics, the only audience being a few hardened locals and a crowd of foreigners from a work camp down the lane who spent the day picking strawberries on piece rate and their evenings picking up English in the swamp dialect of those parts. And then one evening while we were describing how she stood on the bridge at midnight throwing snowballs at the moon, a girl came into the bar with a group from the camp. She had it all, that beauty that keeps you in suspense, waiting for it to realize itself within the perfect face made almost ugly by contrast. She sat down with her friends while I hamfisted my way through the rest of the chorus, much less loudly than before. The factory gang at once launched into the next verse but my hands did not follow, I was too much aware of them lying on the chipped ivory keys, huge and gross. Someone shouted, come on then, but I had forgotten the tune, what chords I had to play. I got up from the piano and just stood there. She was sitting by another girl whose arm was around her shoulders, taking a cigarette from her own mouth to give to her, the flow of her breasts, in a woollen sweater, her long legs in jeans. I was conscious of the sweat on my palms and upper lip, of my breathing, a flap of phlegm in my throat. I wanted to do wild things, to shake and cry. It all came together

in me, my dud life, the town far away, this girl beyond me, out of reach. One of my fellow pea shovellers said something to me, I told him to fuck off and made for the door. I walked and ran straight back to the factory, bundled my things together, dug out the night foreman and demanded my pay and card. He finally produced both, I went out of the factory gates, spent the night on the floor of the station waiting room and next morning caught the early train out of there.

It was a long hot journey back to town, the carriage packed with people and crying children. I snatched a sandwich and a glass of beer between trains, lit various cigarettes and dozed off in a windowful of sunlight. When my train finally entered the station I was absolutely worn out with expectation and weariness and desire, imagining how well this surprise appearance would suit her life, with its banal delight in the happening. The town as I saw it from the bus was curiously changed, closer and more hectic. It was an oven of a day, slated with heat and the streets filled with a mess of people I had forgotten about, dowdy teenagers with trannies and sad birds working hard at their good time, middleaged couples, the men sporting white cloth jackets and open necks, the women turning the colour of beef in the wicked stripping sun. They were only the day trippers and vacationists who give this place whatever justification for existence it may have, but it was a long time

since I had been there in season and I had grown used to the quietness and reticence of the town during the long winter months when it seems ashamed of itself and tries to pretend it isn't really there. Two weeks were enough to proclaim the start of the official summer and turn the place into a booming brash clown with a wad of notes and an urban accent. And to leave me quite out of it all, just another breezy visitor dropping in to see sights.

I got off the bus at the familiar stop and walked down to the house, still not fully believing I was back. There was no reply to my knocks at the blue door, but on turning the handle I found it unlocked and left my bag inside on the bed, changing into my swimming trunks. The window was open and with the breeze the cries and murmur from the street entered, cool room, quiet above it all.

The roads were baking and smelt of wet tar. She was perhaps on the beach. From the railings of the promenade I could distinguish nobody in the sprawl of bodies and towels and deckchairs crowding the elm shingle. I went down the broad steps, a little dozy from my cooped travels and the leap from a musty province to this, this scene. Over the road and crunching on the filthy cobble above the tide line. By the flagpole I saw the lifeguard I knew holding court and asked him if he had seen her. Yeh, grinning, she was over there, somewhere. Where had I been? Here and there. He pointed an arc in the air. Off I went through the mob in my best summer slouch, an

idle suggestion of piledriver thighs, and felt their casual eyes flick me in passing, pins and needles on the flesh. Who is this tall handsome stranger? Ah, the problem of identity, chosen by a panel of experts as best buy after exhaustive tests into every brand of popular angst. A huge lady with decaying buttocks feels the sea tickle her toes and screams in mock horror to her husband, braced and belted, hankerchiefed pate. It's freezing. It tastes horrid says cute Penelope, photographed after a ducking by her sweet coz. Two young dollies offer their homekilled hips and tenderized bosoms to the sun, as they will to no man, and watch me pass with finely calculated expressions of nonchalant disinterest. Bongjurnas dere dollies. What do you want, I ask. We want fun but not too much, not too much fun, not too close. And so I pass on, to and fro and free and fried, in quest of the unattainable, the ineffable, the inedible, a hero of our times, modern man in search of a whole.

She saw me before I her, and when I did, her screwed eyes disbelieving the light, some stranger with a chance resemblance, I got the sickening feeling I knew so well, that a horrible mistake had been made, I had come on the wrong day, in the wrong year, the wrong life. Oh, it is you, she said. I couldn't believe my, what are you doing here? I couldn't stick it, I said, I had to come back and see you. Oh, says she. And turned her

bulging black bra back to the manly beach. Squdge. And what, says he to her, thinking how his stretch pants make his genitalia look like a tumour, what, or growth, which in a sense they are, what said I have you been doing with yourself then? Oh, you know. Head turned to her friend the mouse lying beside her. Pulling faces? Mousey never stirs, delicate eyelids shutteted. Actually she's quite fine in a dulcet way. Dulse ate, shitting yet. Vee haf azayg ima cuntree. And now the cat is back. What have you been playing at? Blowing Bubbles? Why are you not pleased to see me? What are you whispering about in silence? Why, are you laughing at me?

It's a pity you couldn't last out the month, she said. It's good for morale, I mean for people to do what they say they're going to do.

The seas teased the dull pebbles, vast and grey washing. You'll get burnt in this light, it's when the cloud cuts out the.

I know. We're just going. Are you coming? Take this towel, and carry my bag would you. I failed my dip did I tell you?

A child yells, its hand gashed on a slip of glass. And the mother turns dreamily on her side towards it, her husband's hand slipping round her stomach out from under the cord of her briefs. You did not tell me. I though I might have put it in a letter. I say all sorts of things in letters and forget them afterwards. Why is the sun not

garish and setting red? We climbed the slow steps and I would take the mouse and kiss her broken mouth, for the taste of surprise.

And then I had to find somewhere to sleep. The girls told me that my old bedsit downstairs had been let, and with the holiday season now in full swing rooms were both hard to find and very expensive. So for the time being I went to stay with some friends out of town, in a village beneath that great wave of chalk about to break. And every day I took the bus into town and lay on the beach with her, every evening we went to the pub and drank and shouted at each other, each night I caught the bus back, alone.

I have to go home for a bit, in about a week. See the parents, you know. So you'd be able to have our room then.

When I first saw you at that party, remember? I thought isn't he fab, you know the way you do, but then now I've got to know you, I mean you're not really like that. I don't mean not as good, only you're different. You're not what I expected. Waiter! Take this away, I distinctly said medium. You mean you don't like what you've got. No it's not that, but if you expect one thing and you get something different, well it comes as a bit of a surprise that's all. I mean I've got to adjust, you've got to give me time to adjust.

I dreamed a dream that made me sad, concerning

myself and a girl who'd been had. I asked quite casually, without thinking, just mouthing the ritual words. Ten Players and a box of Swans please. And when I opened the packet it was full of worms, and the match heads were just blobs of lipstick. So I took them back but the shop had closed, been demolished and replaced by a funeral parlour where a man dressed in a mouse suit pulled up a coffin and told me to lie down. There's a lot of new development in this part of town.

My friend said she would go and stay with Bob if we wanted the room, but I couldn't very well throw her out like that so I said no thanks, I hope you don't mind.

But I mean, great, well why? I mean if she offered.

No no, I couldn't just throw her out.

But you're not throwing anybody out, she's offering you said, to go.

Well she didn't exactly offer. I mean she sort of suggested it, to be decent, she didn't mean me to take her up on it.

How do you know what she meant? Anyway we need the room more than her. There's no possible point in you two sharing the room like a couple of schoolgirls if she offers off her own bat to let us have it. You haven't got Mother Superior inspecting your knickers now you know.

But that's all wrong, we mustn't ask her to go, it would be wrong, I mean she pays half the rent.

Fuck the rent. Anyway she's probably only looking for an excuse to go and ball with this Bob or whatever his name is.

Don't say things like that. You don't understand the way we work, girls sharing.

Bloody right I don't. I mean if you were queer or something there might be some point in it, but as it is.

Well you'll just have to take my word for it. After all, it's me that has to live with her.

But that's just what you don't have to do. You have to live with me. Me, me, me, me.

You, he, she, it, we, you, they, they, I. I couldn't make any sense of her. I had gone wrong somewhere, gone away and lost track. Something or someone had slipped into the scene and set all my sums out. But I felt sure I could lure her back to me, now I was there again. If I only gave her time to adjust, to feel the old spells. And the days were still sunny, the pub full and our beery smelly evenings only a little curtailed, cast-rated as I said goodnight in the pitched dark street and kissed her, no I can make my own way home, go on you'll miss your bus. The incredible gap between the soft spongy creature who raised her face to be kissed and suffered an excitement about her body she did not want or understand, and the hard scraping as her mind began to move, meshed to quite different wheels.

The days went quickly and led nowhere. And then

she told me, for she was always absolutely truthful in her fashion, that mousey had moved out of her own accord and if I liked I could come and stay for the remaining three days before she went home. She did not try and claim credit for dispatching mouse, but perhaps she was simply uninterested in my estimate of her. Nor did she tell me that she was having a period and that the sump would not be drained until she was far away and safe from my unsteady flesh.

Three days in the little windy room, three mornings of scorching together on the shingle, three afternoons sitting listening to that engraved record, and watching from our height the scurry of people below, three evenings crescendo of drunkenness and rowdy fun in the pub, three strolls home tight with drummer's lust, three sessions in the lavatory that did not flush properly, watching her withdrawn tampon bouncing in the stream of my beery thin piss, three nights of unspeakable agony lying naked beside her and kissing her and biting the swell of her udder breasts as she squeezed the marrow from my bone with her clammy fist.

And then, thank God, it was over. I saw her off on the train with sadness, for I knew I should not be able to hold her now, out of the reach of my eyes. Nevertheless it appeared as a shock, that letter I received a fortnight later.

Don't be angry but I won't be able to go on holiday

with you. In fact I won't be coming back to town. Don't think I don't like you, it's just I'm all confused and I don't know what to do. You remember the artist I told you I was going with before, well he's come to stay with me. I'm just telling you this in case you hear it from one of the crowd and think I'm being sneaky trying to keep it from you. He says he wants to marry me but I don't think he's thought about it enough. I don't know if we're really compatible though I feel very strongly about him at times. We're going to go to Italy. But I mean I got on much better with you, you're easier to get on with. Anyway this will only bore you so I'll stop, I only wrote you because I didn't want you to hear it from someone else.

As if, she gone, I would go near her shoddy gang, as if that had ever been more than the price I paid to be with her and see her. I was finished, that letter just summed it up. I wanted out, fast, not even to begin to think about all the possible clues I had missed at the time, about the part I had played in her big production. What right had she to break off like this, before I had outgrown her or arranged a replacement? I dashed off a passionate corny letter sponge full of the sort of sentiment I hoped might attract her, culled from my memories of the problem corner in a teenage weekly she used to read, where twelve year olds sign themselves Worried because the boyfriend hasn't felt them yet. Back came a closely inked hash of female fiction and popular psychiatry, with bore-

dom and a sense of duty written all over it. It was so hopelessly clumsy that it painlessly killed any remaining hope or desire that I might have felt. If this was what her artist had come to stay with then I wished him luck. I wrote a brief note at the bottom of this rigmarole, that I hoped she got what she wanted when she decided what it was, which exactly expressed my feelings even if it was a bit nasty, replaced her screed in its envelope and sent it back to her. After all, she might want to use it again some day. I was free, and though I secretly hoped my spurned love might cause her agonies of remorse in which she would send me frantic and unreadable letters, I in fact spent my days quietly basking in the sun and unaccustomed pleasure of having absolutely no commitments to anyone. The past two years had been, eventful shall we say? It was time to pause and take stock before moving on to pastures new.

What had I learnt? I had learnt that two is more than one, that messing about with other people's bodies and lives is more interesting than messing about with your own. I had seen many new faces and places, lived things I had scarcely imagined and learnt the difference, perhaps changed as much in these two years as in any two years of my life, and yet it did not seem like change, rather a catalogue of new deceptions, new ways of becoming and never being me. But before I continue I must make a phone call.

For it occurred to me that in a few days you sailed for somewhere on the other side of the world, and to ensure the complete and undisputed possession of my freedom I wanted to seal it with a few kind words from you, to melt the wax.

You were out, I was told by a disapproving female voice, though whether it disapproved of you being out or had guessed who I was I did not know. I waited a couple of hours and then returned to the little cube of light and magic voices. My hands, I noticed with surprise, were wet and my stomach tight. The bell rang. Yes, would I hold on? And then I heard you say, hullo? A telephone voice. I gave you my name. Your tone richened with association, much less steady. We exchanged a little chat about boats and sailing dates. And then after a longish pause I said that I had just wanted to make sure everything was all right and there were no hard feelings. I realized as I said it how silly it sounded, but that was what I said, and my breath stopped when you paused and said it wasn't quite as easy as that. Never before had you used anything like a tone of reproach or attempted to face me with the fact of your feelings. And now, when I imagined you quite calm and settled again, you made it all plain in words. How do you mean? In a slightly peevish tone you said, explaining the obvious to a child or someone deliberately obtuse, that although you didn't hate me now or anything you had been very badly hurt at the time. I started to

say something, you cut in, I was sick you know, I mean physically. There was a long silence. I said I hadn't known. You did not add, and hadn't wanted to. You said that although that was all over and you felt all right now, you couldn't just pretend it hadn't happened, I mean it did and that's bound to make a difference. I mean even if I would like to say it was all right, well it wouldn't be true, it couldn't be could it? The shiny black speaker suddenly asserted itself, slipping in my loosened hand. Then the pips sounded and I yelled don't hang up and slipped in some more money. I suddenly saw what I wanted, all I could ask now. But you don't hate me now, at this moment? Oh no, you said, easily, almost contemptuously, meaning if that's enough to satisfy you then take it. And I understood in that minute exactly what the theme of my own sickness was to be, although I had no notion then of what it was to mean to me. It was simply that the past is past and cannot be tampered with. That is all. But for me, who can only live through my chameleon variety of mood by constantly tampering and adjusting and altering, for me it was shocking to realise that I had touched something which could not subsequently be changed to match the colour of my mind, something totally out of my control and totally within my life, embedded in me as a cancer. I said goodbye, you echoed me and the line went dead. I have not heard your voice since, not once since then, two years, two long years

and never even heard you say a word, even a horrible word that would cut and tear.

Back in the empty room I sat numbed and tried to warm up the balance sheet of experience I had been preparing. But that seemed a trifle now, ridiculous to think of drawing a line, as if one could see time in the round. And in any case there was now a present making its demands again, and I wondered whether I should try to see you before you left, then dismissed the idea as ridiculous. But of course it was only your presence in the country, your theoretical availability in person then and later in writing, that misled me. For what I felt, denying me the ease of leisured contemplation, was not a prompt from the present at all. It was the past making its first quiet appearance, without taxing its power, simply slipping a subversive aside into my royal speech. And yet, even supposing I had recognised the nature of the germ, what could I have done against a disease by definition incurable? Saved a self respect I do not much value by never writing those hideous grovelling letters? Saved you perhaps an emotional drag you could have done without, but also denied you the ultimate triumph you so richly deserved. Of course people no longer die of this disease, dying has become unfashionable in a general way. Perhaps I should have gone to the hip doctors of the town and got a shot in the arm, an inoculation of cool guaranteed

to chase that tight. The answer is blowing in the mind. Sometimes I am certain I inly cultivate these hangups as my only claim to quiddity, my means of disguising an essential mediocrity of mind and spirit. Forcing a pillow under the shoulders of his jacket he sat down and composed the tragedy of a hunchback. What I mean is supposing I realized in embryo that I was really just a nice cuddly bloke who wanted a bird in bed and a happy life and didn't like being crossed in his little whims and had dreamed a huge romantic epic of a personality as a secretary dreams of the holidays, supposing I have ever been or am ever on the point of having this insight, would I give it admittance? I cannot imagine myself believing it, but is that because it is not true or because it is? No, I know, this is senseless. We can never allow any view of ourselves as true, it can only ever appear as another possible fiction. If, as in the old horror story, we met ourselves walking towards us down a corridor we should not really scream and faint, for fear of frightening this inoffensive stranger who has a resemblance agreed, quite close resemblance but what of it? These eyes are made for looking on, not in at the face they light, and although mirrors allow us that, and to mirrors and in particular you my ripple floated love I will in one moment fight my way back out of this tangle with myself, though mirrors have accustomed us to a

picture of slab features, yet in the very platitude of that restricted view can you not discern the missing link, the dimension always withheld? Or suddenly exposed to a system of glass in a shop or at the barbers, have you never felt that pang of rejection on seeing the strange profile, the hairy nape that will never turn before our eyes and show the scars stitching it to our features, will always remain unattached to that banal poster face we have long since ceased to question?

When she left I had kept the room from day to day for want of a better idea, but now that you were going going gone this lazy life was haunted by a chill I eventually traced to a puncture, a tiny hole the size of a ship seen through the wrong end of an expanding telescope, a dot of ink in a school atlas through which flowed the thin stream of parting and finality that diluted even my hot summer days, and inclined them before their time towards the cavity of autumn. I was free. I could stay there wallowing in leisure grown fat, I could waste my time profitably and take a job, I could go home and hope that the old place might prove fertile again. I went home.

My parents were away on holiday, and as they had no idea that I would be returning I did so to a locked house. Some acrobatics and a faulty window catch remembered from my childhood saw me inside, only to find that

the water and electricity had been turned off at the mains and the whole place shrouded in dust sheets. I cleared a space in the front room and spent a few unreal days and fading evenings there, but I had no notion how to activate the power supply and before long got fed up eating fish and chips, besides which the lavatory was getting a bit ripe. Finally after one weary sleepless night on the sofa I decided to try my luck elsewhere. None of my close friends was around, for of course they were all taking their deserved and long anticipated holidays. The little town sweltered through a hushed heatwave. One or two people I knew smiled absently and passed on, bland and occupied. Such lovely weather! But where was the flaw would let me prise my way back into this life running smoothly, just out of reach? I had broken my own arrangements and fallen now where I have remained ever since, among the silent oiled machinery of others, who passed me as traffic does the man standing beside his useless car on the verge of the motorway.

I went to the station and bought a ticket for a town on the coast where I had the address of a fellow wanderer from a letter he had sent me in the spring. It was a possibility, the only one I could think of. The day was close and clammy, intensely hot. The train rolled along, stumbling here and there upon views of the sea swelling gently out and out as far as the eye goes. I found the house after some time but the sluttish woman

who came to the door with a smell of boiled cabbage and nappies told me he was not in. Was working somewhere, on the roads, in the city. She told me where she thought it was, and I recognized with a shock the road on which stood the house of my spring girl. The woman invited me to stay and wait for him, but I wanted to be doing something that day before I fell asleep and anyway I cannot stomach boiled cabbage or for that matter babies. I thanked her and wandered slowly back to the station. The buildings and stone walls blended perfectly with the overcast day bloated with heat, that low and unassertive beauty of a land which leaves one open either to unimaginable happiness or unassuaged despair, a country with no middle register either to hinder or console.

I wandered through the empty city and took again, queerly, that unlikely bus that runs from the brutal tenements of the dockland up to that living roll of hills that I knew were imaginary even before I knew who lived there. Oh my country, your cursed beauty that touches my eyes with a depth more splendid than even my childhood dreaming could give you, for that intimacy taken from me by the death of my days is a pain kept fresh by distance. We do not touch, as one touches and lives in a town, a country, but you surround me with the sadness of loss, for you are the circle that is the memory of a sphere, your presence the more intense for the absence it reveals.

I got off the bus and walked along the road with

its spread of all the city below. There was no work in progress that I could see and I felt ridiculous and exposed standing there in the sweated afternoon, seeking someone there or round the next corner or miles away. I passed the house and passed on. Somebody had told me she was away on the continent or somewhere. That at least was one thing over and done with. I walked on enquiring at various building sites for my friend, but the name meant nothing to them. Suggestions grew wilder and wilder. I walked, plodded on along the endless road, and cars sped by. Passing a police station I went in and asked the tired cop if he had heard of any roadworks in the area. Only the one, which he gave me to understand was just round the next corner though in fact it was a good two miles added to my previous two before I reached the place and got the familiar reply from a suspicious foreman. He suggested a further job just up the road, and in a final assault on this muggy aimless day I trudged on until the road narrowed and the houses gave way to open country. That was it, I was going no further. Some large factory was being built beside the road at this point and as I had nothing better to do until a bus came along I wandered into the mist of concrete and plaster dust and asked. And there he was.

He said he would not be off for half an hour, but since it was now a nice sunny day I did not mind that. I went back the way I had come, found the first pub and

settled down with a beer. Time passed extremely slowly in the dull light and buzz of a wasp trapped between two sashes of the bleary window. It had only to slip through the gap between the frames to be free, but instead kept picking at the glass, unable to understand what had happened to its own liquid air. By the end of my third pint I was identifying so strongly with that wasp that I held my breath every time it climbed up the pane and groaned as it buzzed furiously down again. He must have finished work by now. I emptied my glass, went over and closed the upper sash, releasing the wasp into the room, where it promptly zoomed over to a sticky patch of beer on the bar and was crushed by the publican with the rolled up evening newspaper a small boy had just brought in and placed in his hand. I returned my glass and went out into the lukewarm eddies of the day. On a pile of concrete pipes the workmen had been burying as drains I sat down and watched the traffic pass smoothly by, and knew that if I was ever to catch up with you or her or any of the people my heart has at some moment recognized I should have to get up and join these clean and eager people each going somewhere oblivious of the dust they raised from the dried mud caked on the tarmac, the dust hanging limp in the air behind them. And I realized at the same moment that I would always remain on foot, watching the lighted windows and drawn curtains and dissolving them in imagination and longing, and that it was probably better so

because in reality, well you have sat in rooms, you have travelled in cars, you know what it is like. I also realized with that hypersensitive acumen for which I am justly noted that I was feeling rather drunk and very tired and foolish and deluded and where had that lying cunt got to?

At which moment who should appear but the last named. We took a bus, went into a pub, took another bus, ate boiled nappies and cabbage, went into another pub, walked home. I talked even more drivel than usual and then collapsed on the bed, leaving him the choice of relations with a protesting male or his far from protesting landlady, an unmarried mother whom he screwed in return for the room and board. In the event he chose the landlady and when I awoke sharp as a pin at midday he was gone to add some more bricks to the shining example of industrial expansion that kept him in fags drinks and records.

As I breakfasted off a cup of stale tea and cigarette I considered where to go from there. Amidst the waffle of the previous evening we had discussed my situation and he had said that if all else failed I could stay with him for a while. He also mentioned a woman we knew who was helping to run a cafe in some seaside village along the coast and who might have a spare room or a better idea. Cabbage and babies decided the issue, I said goodbye to both and caught a train back to the city.

It was another of those sunny days when the whole country beams in a light as rare and polished as an eclipse and the weathered granite buildings grit their teeth with the dour fatality of old men who know the end is, nevertheless, near. At the bus station I found that of the two buses which did the run each day to the little village I wanted one had gone three hours previously and the other did not leave for another two. It was a tiresome and pointless timelag, too short to do anything worthwhile and too long to ignore. In the end I just stood around the concrete forecourt and waited.

The bus station is alongside the river that runs like a tapeworm through the city and carries its filth out into the innocent sea. Flanked by two bridges, the nearer a massive iron contraption with no floor, bundles of barbed wire this end and the bland bricks of a new factory the other, the farther a stone structure hiding the hulls of the ships berthed at the wharves beyond. The path of an old railway track emerged from the derelict bridge and disappeared again beneath the forecourt of the bus station. And above the grimy warehouses on the other bank I could see in the distance the line of hills where I had been the previous day. To be born in a city surrounded by hills is to see death in your cradle, never forgotten. I sat on the metal railings surrounding the forecourt. Buses pulled in and left every few minutes with the names of towns and villages on them that were

lines torn out of my imperfect past, the still life between which and its mirrored image in the future I am trapped and cannot realize the space between. The squat worn redbrick and windowless building off the road in a strip of waste land was, tritely enough, the municipal morgue, where the city fathers bricked up their fears of death. But of course it is not quite as easy as they thought, seeing death as only an inconvenient interruption of civic life necessitating a new appointment and the tasteful disposal of remains. Death is perhaps the least important part of dying, simply an act turned inside out. The corpse is only a joke at which we cannot laugh. What death I know is the shadow cast behind us by life in making light and love, is the pathos of our attempts to live despite the vast deadweight of all the sterile universe, is the pity and unselfish tenderness I feel break out like sweat on my body for the gestures which are past and the fumbblings which will join them and the hopeless vulnerability we all share and will never admit, until the breast withers and the mind can no longer project and the sun cools and goes out. In which bricked up building are you kept from me my love, any of my loves? Along the endless straight dusty street I walked, and the hills unattainably remote appeared between walls. On the continent, in a ship heading south, off to Italy. I cannot quarrel with your choices but I would see you once more, once only and that not for love but to know that you too know and feel

and are with me in this silence so much deeper than loving, the silence of sympathy for all our elephantine attempts at happiness, for all our hopeless attempts to live with duration by constantly preparing a present we can never devour as rapidly as it is snatched away from us.

I found the woman at the cafe easily enough, but she could only put me up for a day or two as she was herself going on holiday at the end of the week. She also told me that you had been staying with her before you sailed, a fortnight earlier. A coincidence, though not that great. I was at first more concerned to find a place I could rent cheaply than to speculate on whether the bed-linen had been changed since you slept in it. But although the whole pretty place was stuffed with villas and cabins and cots, they were all either taken or exorbitant or unavilable to people under fifty or all three. And so I sat around drinking my money and watching the sea coming and going in the harbour.

And slowly sought the eyes through which you had seen the same scenes. That church, at what times of day would you have looked at the flint packing of its walls? And in what possible mood? Did you see the village as a stage or a cage? I asked the woman vague questions. She seemed to think you had enjoyed yourself. One of the local lads had taken a fancy to you and you had had a roaring couple of weeks together. She obviously knew about me

and was exaggerating to see if I would wince, but there would have been some truth in it. I became disenchanted with the place overnight and realized that I was, absurdly, feeling jealous. I wanted to find out who this fellow was and take a look at him. It had been all very well while the village was only a backdrop against which I could imagine your loneliness and despair in the hot afternoons, but now you suddenly sprang to life, a gaudy Jill come up from the box and running round with the boys, where I could not follow you. Although I had accepted the fact of your disappearance I had hardly even begun to appreciate it as a reality. The news that you had had an affair, however slight, with someone else, was disturbing, and still more that you had not told me. When I rang up you had known, had been at it the week before and yet you did not tell me. Which meant, what I had only accepted as one signs a document without reading it, that I had no more rights over you, that you were beyond my reach. How bitter it was, that taste I was to acquire slowly until now it flavours everything, the taste of your independence, of your freedom.

And I began, slowly, dimly, to understand why you had been unable to accept the end of my affection, why you had to undergo such a painful and protracted withdrawal. For I had thought in my clearcut way that if someone said goodbye the other would immediately understand what was being said and react accordingly, tears, screams,

disinterest, threats, sulks or whatever, get it over and then turn away. But I now found myself being taught the meaning of our separation word by word, or rather feature by feature. We would not see each other again for a long time, a year at least, that I had learnt. But now there was another fact to face, that you might wish to have other affairs, and that there was no longer any reason for you to consult me about it. Of course I had known this all along, of course, I am not that thick, but I did not understand what it would mean to me in the event, in the moment. It meant that I began considering you as a girl seen by strange eyes, that you ceased to be a piece of my past and grew to your full and proper stature as a person to be desired and loved. And as such I found you, or rather rediscovered you, infinitely desirable and lovely, succeeding with any man you set your mind to, and it was through the slit eyes of these faceless males, your future lovers who did not even know of my existence or care, that now you were beyond my reach I fell in love with you for the second time.

As you will have guessed, it was pride suffered first. But a few other feelings, more worthy as they used to say, followed it close, and before long I found myself wishing again for you to be there, and realizing how devastatingly final so contingent a thing as distance could be. For distance, well I thought above that level, ridiculous, as if love devolved upon the price of living,

a bourgeois consideration for those who plan their lives and loves upon an economic index. As if in the event the laws of nature would recognize in me a being to whom they did not apply and I would be exempted from such petty irritations. But the beaurocracy of fact apparently made no provision for special cases, I was to be treated exactly like the couple who separate because their work demands it but will marry next year and in the meantime have fun.

But I knew when I thought of you as a person present, as real as that boy wheeling his delivery bicycle or the barman adjusting the television set, it was not just a continuation of our old life I wanted. Not simply to resume, for had I not already rejected that? I wanted something and nothing, I wanted one impossibility, your presence, to represent another, one I could not even wish for directly because it was in nobody's power to give me it, the erasure of all that had happened, a sight of the sea and mountains and low houses unhindered by the knowledge in my mind that made them inaccessible as the rainbow, that I had used you as a means, and had no longer an end in view to overlook your suffering. What troubled me and kept me apart was too great a static charge, a superfluity of emotion with no possible point of discharge, an absurd unease. I remembered in detail your bearing under my hands, your absolute and unforced behaviour, your sadness and your love. If one decides that this is not

worth as much as that and opts for the latter than well and good, what weakness is there for pity to exploit? Any regret is unfelt in the muscular joys of expressing a will in the face of brute nature, part of which the rejected becomes. In practice the end always justifies the means as a violence necessary if we are to overcome the dying in us, the inertia of what is past, to act and make and do and assert the life we have. What more exhilarating than treading down the passive feelings of restraint in the name of a positive goal, do not believe that men who torture and kill are some strange breed who feel no pity. No, the repression of their remorse is precisely the force that drives them on to any giddy bestiality. I know just what he felt, the cheery plump guard who beat girls to death with a crowbar to encourage the others to work harder. He felt the cool clean satisfaction of the saint who denies a temptation in order to cleanse his soul, the satisfaction of a man who is in control of his baser impulses.

My ends were not as grand as that of course. Most of us do not have enough interest in manipulating the course of life to need do more than ruffle a few feelings here and there. But in our small way we do what we can. And now I found myself without the leading light which had guided me, could no longer even remember what it had been. I had been fed up with you. All right, but how had that led me to subject you in the most brutal fashion to my

total disinterest in any feelings you might have? That girl, I had never really loved her, or so it seemed. Certainly I no longer loved her, I despised her and found myself left with just the usual vague values by which to judge a series of actions which only made sense in terms of a conviction I had not simply lost but come to deride. I was guilty of an incomprehensible action, for the I who had acted did not coincide with the I who now, totally at a loss, had to live with this unclaimed act. I was responsible to myself for deeds I felt of no kin beyond the simple dead end that it was I who had done them. There was no one else in sight. I was all of it, at a distance, as though I could still not be, all the weight of what I did without the buoyancy of what I might have done. And when I whined in the night for you to be there, when I counted the number of days by which I had missed my last chance of seeing you, it was simply an exploration of the nature of this absurdity, as I had once used to explore the shape of your face with my fingers, in the dark, only to measure the wonderful constancy of this creature who did not dissolve and reappear with the blood out as did my fleeting dreams in their passage into nightmare.

By the time the cafe finally closed up I still had not found another bed, but I was not sorry to have to leave. I travelled back home in the jogging bus and walked through the familiar streets to the house. I un-

locked the front door into the hall and two worlds mixed crazily, seeing on the mat a card in your writing and smelling a foul stench from the lavatory I had completely forgotten about. I picked up the card. It was a photograph of some pyramids or other. You were having a great time. The ship was lovely and the weather beautiful. This was the most thrilling city. And your name, but without the casual love that had given you away once before. Had that crossed your mind, out there in unimaginable lands? What were you doing now, at this moment? I saw myself standing as in a film, holding the card, and for the benefit of any spectators slipped it into my pocket and looked round decisively, commandingly, enough of this sentimental nonsense let's see you do something really constructive, like flushing the lavatory. A pail of water from my unsuspecting neighbour and half a bottle of disinfectant saw me through that crisis, but I was still faced with the less easily resolved problem of what to do with the rest of the holiday, or for that matter with the rest of my life which, accidents apart, threatened to be considerable. Since I had no regular work, finding life quite exhausting and complicated enough without, and hence none of those homemade limitations that people mean when they assume that special tone of voice to name their occupation, as if it transfigured them, as I had no ties and no ambition the fact of my having come to the end of this piece of development started two years

before meant that my whole attitude to everything was called for question, and considering my whole attitude to everything has never got me very far. The idea of holidays was itself only a hangover from school, reinforced by my time with you, for as far as I can recall I have never stayed in any job long enough to earn one. My holidays were when other people started behaving as aimlessly as myself and simply meant a smudging of the water in which I swam, but the idea of crawling out on to the land and trying to grow lungs held no appeal. Now that I was no longer connected to other people there was no need to carve up my constant time into the compartments within which they chose to live. In short, to my relief, I realized that I could stop pretending to relax and enjoy myself, which was killing me, and get on with it. Where should I go? The choices were limitless, precisely because I had, of course, already chosen. My wallowing in a treacle of freedom was the stupor of a man standing before the departure board in a great railway station, surveying the towns and the cities and the names of the expresses and the impossible romance of it all. But he is only at the station in the first place because he has a train to catch, only consulting the board to find at what time it leaves, his ticket already securely tucked up in his wallet.

The sea is high and wild today, glazed with light and set pockets of shadow, ebbing to the tug of a current as old and insistent as desire. The artist is perhaps also a reminder, a tide running quietly where the firm land ends. If only he too could set loose the catch within himself, not to capture a rhythm but to let himself be captured, to recollect in anguish. But instead, half baked minds, these garbled notes, tired men absently studying the dirt under their own fingernails.

Without a girl to give a frame of reference life goes all flabby and pointillist. Whatever feelings I had or thought I had for any of the three who touched my isolation in different ways, simply by being there they induced an order of sorts. I could always fix a position for myself by noting their objections and agreements, the queer unexpected bulges of another personality coming and going in the mist. Indeed probably, for all I sneer at the arrangement I now enjoy, it is this and none of my brave facing has brought me out of the worst. For when I met her I was near, not madness, for that immersion in self is just the opposite of my leaky life, but I was developing a bad squint in the attempt to trace at least the

outlines of myself, developing a taste for funny faces too, new ways of seeing and being seen which almost but not quite achieve a perfect fit, only for a few boils on the neck whose rubbing, it seems, will soon clear. She cured me of that in very simple ways, by expecting me to be there, making me an absence or a presence to the scene she saw, the room in which she looks over at me now and defines this heap of being as a man sitting at a table by the window, looking out at the sea and the gusty Saturday afternoon. So we impress shapes upon the fluid gravy of the mist and make a tree, walking towards it.

But that late summer I was only whatever I was, everything in particular and nothing in general, all at sea. Once I would have steered by the stars, reading those cold distant vibrations as though they were fairy lights rigged up in the branches of a personal heaven. Once when I looked up I saw the stars winking at me, now only through breaks in the cloud, and even then their secret excludes me.

The town when I reached it was beginning to empty again. Not that there were noticeably fewer people around, but one could feel the overripe summer about to drop, the very fact of my return seemed in itself a blow given the year. I avoided seeing anyone I knew, put myself on the supply list as a teacher of music, found a room, a small utterly bare room in the attics of a house in the great seafront crescent that was once so prosperous. The

landlady, who lived in the bottom back room with five smelly cats a television set and the portrait of her late husband, seemed to be rather ashamed of the whole place. It was certainly decrepit, but it seemed to have happened rather than been made and that I liked. The original dining room, through which she led me to the stairs, was crowded with the junk of fifty years, bedsteads, tea chests full of dead newspapers, a tandem, wheelchairs, armchairs, a rolled union jack, a Monet snowscape up on end against a broken piano with half its guts splayed out, a spinning top, a dropleaf table supporting a huge bronze Cupid and Psyche with an equally huge tabby cat tastefully draped over the latter's charms. I suppose on reflection that the Monet was a copy and the cat real, but I would not have been surprised to find it the other way round.

Up the grim staircase, bare brown boards where the carpet had been, up five flights to the top and a room small and painted glossy white, cold and the wind banging the window. Outside a queasy drop to the promenade and the sea. It was hideous and I loved it. I must have lived by now in almost every room of these proud houses, from drawing room to kitchen. This was the third maid's bedroom, though some nasty stains on the mattress when I turned it over and a magazine of porny pictures dressed up with a lower equivalent of the pencilled moustache suggested that it had come a long way since then.

It occurs to me that I miss my old rooms as I do

my old lovers, and that marriage and a mortgage is the only answer to this, and is no answer.

But whatever alchemy the house was preparing to work on my life got no chance to ferment properly, for hardly had I accustomed my eyes to the new tones and my ears to the perpetual ground of the sea than one morning a blue envelope lay on the hall table, and the name on it was mine. Of course it is useless to speculate on whether and if and I cannot say whether the disease was already rooted or if it was that letter carried the germ. And when I think that it was in fact the letter and that if only you had lost my address, as you had lost every other part of me, I might have never have wandered into this labyrinth of memory, when I think that it is only a terrible need for hope that is my bias. There is no question of fault here.

You had arrived, and were desperate. You hated the country, the city and the people. The life was brash and modern and mechanical. You pleaded with me to write quickly, for you felt utterly alone. At once my vegetable peace of mind was gone. Not that I regretted it, I was knocked out of it by the first stir of real emotion all that summer, and after the deathly vacuum of missing you and smothering it I was overjoyed to feel again the fresh live leap of a new hope, a second birth before my eyes. You had turned to me, to me, not to the bevy of lovers I had imagined you enclosed by, you had written to me to

ask for comfort. Oh and the warm flow of spirits to the heart as I realized that the game was not lost, was not over, could still even now be saved. My pile of tatty old memories did not make up the sum, we were greater than any heap of facts for we were people and held the seeds of possibility, possibility, that own human dimension we hide from and long for, which I had forgotten in my flower arranging. It was enough that you did not entirely hate and fear me, that there was still a spark of our intimacy that my cruelty had not snuffed out.

I tore up letter after letter to get the tone I wanted, to air this tiny flame. It was a sensible enough letter finally reached you. I said that I had realized that I loved you and had always loved you and had never stopped loving you, that I had only mistaken the thrill of attracting another girl for what I now knew love to mean.

You must decide one of two ways. First of all make sure the depression you feel is not just the routine blues at settling into a new place and job, but if you're sure it's not then for Christ's sake get on the first boat plane or bus back. What I mean is I want you to come, more than I've ever wanted anything I want you back here with me, to look at you and talk to you and eat your horrible meals and have you in bed with me. But there would be no point in you coming unless you had first seen the place out there and rejected it, otherwise we would only be fucked up by that pull back. But if you're sure

then for Christ's sake come back. I'll never be able to replace you, or have the strength to try. My life since I left you has just been a meaningless stupid dream with all sorts of big hairy symbols floating around like bits of people after the explosion and unless you come and touch me awake they'll never get back together again. But I'll get maudlin if I go on.

Which did not stop me going on. I wrote about five pages, stuffed it into an airmail envelope and sent it off next day. Regardless of expense!

And now my life once again hung on letters, telegraph wires seen from a train window. Once a week the little blue slip of paper appeared on the table, the week jerked into new movement and declined as the reply went back and was answered and my heart tensed with increasing force towards the expected letter. And often it was a day or two late, even before those last horrible weeks when the twitching started. Perhaps a postal clerk somewhere wanting his tea, perhaps you forgot to post it when you were out, and when I fearfully opened the hall door and looked, there was nothing. I got to the stage of looking under the table as well, in case it had fallen, in case it had been pushed, anything, to have it be there. And when it was finally apparent that it was not then the day was over and only dull habit kept darkness from falling and me from the sweet escape of sleep. Any other desires or hopes were null beside the intensity

with which I longed for your return, for I knew only that could make sense of the mess and waste I had caused. All I had to do was to let you see this as clearly as I saw it and you would run, hop skip and jump to the docks.

Later, of course, I destroyed all your letters, tearing up the flimsy paper with unnecessary force. As if that could set a period to your memory. And now I would give a lot for just one of those blue squares that fluttered down into the potato bag I used for a dustbin, just one, to give me a lead. For I cannot hope to mimic the incredibly subtle gradations of your distancing with this hand that can transcribe nothing rarer than ecstasy or despair, and only the bubbles of those. But this is merely prevarication. For in fact I am mortally afraid of what I have to do, as well as fed up with the whole stinking business. Exhuming our corpses has been no fun, but how infinitely more deadly in this rehash of what was only a stale melodrama in the first place. When we lived together our blood was there and in reviewing my album of snapshots I could at least feel the flow as I watched. But what do we have now? Me, seated at my table, knees gaping and head in palm, writing a letter. And this one is the same only later, or earlier. And here I am striding along the promenade in my overcoat and crying, yes crying but after all we're not squeamish are we, and striking the heel of my hand against the sandstone blocks of the wall. And now here we have me, quite a good one

this, this is me reading one of your letters on the front steps of the house and you can just see if you look very closely that I have the tip of my tongue between my teeth, a nervous habit of mine when concentrating. No I'm afraid there aren't any of you, you may remember you were on the other side of the world at the time.

Your second letter retracted. You thanked me for writing, were glad to say that things were not as awful as you'd thought at first. My advice to think twice was very wise. I don't want to be wise but loved. Found a nice room, heat terrific, sharing with another girl, I don't know how it will all turn out. It wasn't only you though I thought so at the time, it was the town there and the country and everything, I was fed up.

Don't take my guilt from me, love, for what else have we in common now? And even if it does turn out all right don't let that please just by a happy turn blind you if we could do better. I mean we know each other, we've spent nearly two years rubbing down and working out, we mustn't let that just go squander. It's no use just putting it aside because it gets difficult, that's a child's trick, we must make something of it, realize what is there. Otherwise we're only tourists of love and the only point is how many we can have in the time left us. But it must be possible to break open new dimensions, that's the secret, not picking people up and throwing them aside after looking at the pictures. If you could

bear at all, I mean at all, to come home, then it would be a start. I want to marry you if you will, to try and develop what we have, not start all over again from scratch. Think of all the petty rows and stupidities we had because it took so long to understand the simplest things about each other, do you want to have to go through all that again?

I see what you mean but you don't seem to understand what I've done in coming out here. I've made a break and I've got to stick by what I've done to some extent. I don't mean that I'll stay for good, but it's not as easy as you think. It's easy for you because you haven't had to do anything new, nothing happened to make you. But I suddenly found myself in pieces and I've had to work hard to pull myself together again and make a fresh start. What I mean is don't expect too much, I may have to stay the year. The year. If I left now it would be awkward and it would leave me feeling I'd just blundered down a wrong turning and had to go all the way back. And as you said, that would louse us up. But I do want to come home and marry you and grow babies and cabbages and old with you, only we must not try and pretend that it's all the same as it was. I mean I'm out here and that's different, and it is bound to affect me to some extent. I was down on the beach with this girl I'm living with the other day. I've never seen so much sand, it's like a film. And the water's warm as blood.

I've been trying to imagine a year without you, find I can't do it. But there's something else which worries me more than the actual boredom and pain that would be involved. For as you say, we're bound to change. But don't you see that it's different changing together and apart. If we were together than it's not you or I who changes alone but us, like two ply wood will warp as a plank but if you split it it'll not fit together again afterwards. In a year, think how long that is, we would have changed in infinite ways, we would hardly recognize each other. Or rather we would keep banging on sharp growths and getting angry because the other wasn't looking where they were going. And all the separate experience we had each had in the interim would be like a curtain between the old selves and the present, it would be worse than never having met before because we would constantly be making assumptions on the basis of our lives before and getting things wrong as a result. And the old habits would die hard, and probably our affection with them. What we have is a unique chance of saving what I threw away as if it was used up. But we must decided to act now love, if we wait a year the rot will have already taken over. There's still a chance, a faint chance, just the tip of a tail in sight. But these things are not like money in the bank, you can't keep the instability of love standing waiting for us to decide the time is convenient. If you still want to stay I can't force you of course, I

have no wish to anyway, but I want to make sure you know what you're doing. If you come back at Christmas we might still be able to make a go of it, yes we would, I know we would, we shall. But if it's left any longer then it will be over and no amount of talking will ever alter that. I'm not trying to force your hand my love, my only love. I simply want you to see what is involved. And what is involved is us, nothing more but nothing, nothing less.

You put it all very well, but it's all from your point of view still. And I don't believe what you say is necessarily true. You're so clear about it all but it's not as simple as you make out. You make it sound as though I only had to open the door and step on a passing bus, but quite apart from the money it's a big decision to make and would involve a lot of upheaval all round. Anyway it's not true that if we spent a year apart we could never understand each other. That's totally exaggerated. Or if it is then what kind of love is that? If we can't even put up with a year apart without being unable to understand what the other person is saying then it's not love at all but cowardice and stupidity. Of course we could pick up the threads again, people don't change that much. You make it sound as if you have only to look the other way and I'll turn into a completely different person. That ridiculous, you know I'm not like that. If this love won't survive even a year of separation

then it's not the kind of love I'd want to come ten thousand miles for anyway.

Fuck this letter writing which is the only way I can get at you. If only I had you here, now, sitting beside me. Then I could make you see so easily, and then of course I wouldn't have to. But I know only too well that when I write it all down and when you can't hear the note of my voice and see my face move then it must all seem like special pleading. What it comes down to is this, that words in themselves mean so little as to be confusing if you're trying to say something difficult and intimate. All they will do on their own is convey a mean of expression, an average sense, and so everything sinks into cliché and nonsense. Lovers don't use language like other people, dictionary language, the words don't mean the same, being infinitely richened and extended by the stuff taken for granted, the actual words hardly matter, they're just formulae, the saying is all the work. So that written down like this they're like a tune with no key signature, they can mean anything. And now when I most need to make sure you do not misunderstand me we're reduced to this clumsy impersonal subjectivity half way between conversation and books and with none of the advantages of either. You must make allowances love, knowing a little about me, though even that is fouled by what happened in the summer. I know when I say you've

got to decide and so on it sounds as though I'm inventing a general theory to suit my own ends, but it's not so love, I'm only telling you what I know and what you must know too if you think about it. I know the romantic theory says that love is love is love but the fact remains that separation such as we have known is the blight of love. If we had parted at the height of our affair then all right, that is quite different, but as it is we have sown too much distance and I have too much to show you, not explain or talk my way out of but let you feel and see how close I am to my words when I say I love you. If you had not had a bad time on arrival we might never have exchanged another word, that is our case, our affections hang by accidental threads and only we can make them strong and whole again. We have been given a chance, one that I at least do not deserve, but the rest is all for us to do or leave undone. I know it seems 'tough that I am forcing you to a decision, but don't you see that you're bound to decide in any case. The weeks tick by, it takes seven days for each of these exchanges of letters to be completed, Christmas will soon oh how soon if you say you are coming, soon be here. It is not me that is thrusting the decision upon you, you cannot escape it in any case for by refusing to decide you will in effect decide. I cannot stay the days passing anymore than you, I am not driving you to decide but only reminding you that willingly or not, consciously or by default you will have

to choose to kill our love or make it live. And if I remind you so brutally it is only that it seems a great matter to me, for even apart from our love and all it means more than I could ever tell you without your sweet mouth to kiss, even apart from that there is the fact that now, for once, we have our destinies in our hands if we will only take them up. We are offered a chance to spit in the face of death and decay and loss and forgetfulness and all the dreary apparatus of despair that lies just behind our bright hopes, given a chance to deny it at the last moment and force our blind and silly lives to give us back ourselves. For the time we have this power, we can do it and in doing it will do more than just restore the tender things that grew in our lee. We will be opting for life and not the other, opting for the weak and constant attempts of living things to live in despite of the tide scooping sand from under their feet. And that, my love, would be wonderful and holy, for the only religion I have or want is the religion of the happy ending, of the resurrection, *et exspecto vitam venturi saeculi*, those marvellous words I always weep to hear, the last minute reprieve, the feeling not that everything is all right but that this one moment is and will remain and cannot be denied and proves our hope not a feeble delusion but fact as blatant and real as the decay you can feel all round.

You are right about letters, and about all the rest too. I do love you and since it seems the only way

I will come back at Christmas. I had misunderstood you, I think I'm changing here, you're right, and it wasn't until I forced myself to think about it that I saw what you meant. It weighs on me but there is no other way but to decide what I want and do it. I'm quite comfortable here now, we've decorated the flat a bit and it looks less like a meths drinker's parlour. The girl Sheila is what they call a giggle, we get on quite well and she cheers me up when I get in one of my grumps by just laughing at me. Only she does it naturally, not the forced jokey cackle of someone pretending to laugh you out of it, she really seems to find others' depression a hilarious game, as if it was me who was pretending, until in the end I start overdoing it to convince her and then realize I really am acting and have to give up. She thinks I'm writing cheery newsy letters to you and every time I pause and look up she rattles off half a dozen topics of current interest like a station announcer. But she's very practical, she found a bloke with a car to help shift all my luggage over here from the docks and help carry it upstairs. I'd never have done it by myself. I wasn't quite sure how we ought to thank him, he kept eyeing me as if he expected me to jump into bed, actually I probably would have if Sheila hadn't been there but she's a clean living girl underneath it all. But I need screwing, I can't do without it. I met a man on the boat who screwed me out of kindness, we got on well but he doesn't live

here. The next city is hundreds of miles away, you can have no idea what it feels like living in a place so huge. Well it will make a holiday anyway. The job is easy and the money good, we can have beer with every meal and go out in the evenings, except there isn't much to go to without an escort. I do miss you though. Small things like the fug you used to build up in the room with your cigarettes. I can't smoke that much, though I suppose I could light one and leave it burning in the ashtray like a joss stick, the Eternal Fag. But I need you to talk sense to me and tell me what to do, I'm terrible when it comes to thinking for myself. And I do see you're right about it all. Though somehow I don't feel at all happy, in fact your letter made me more depressed than I've been since I arrived. The sun here never goes out until it sets, it's quite dull at first and then you get used to there not being any weather and it's useful because you can plan things easier.

I've just done a dance around the room and have the house shaking and the couple downstairs silent, they think I'm banging to quieten them. And the mad cunt next door is about to leave his sickening guitar and poke his head around the door and enquire in cultured tones, are you, grunt snaffle click wheeze sigh fart, all right? You could put it that way Fred, you could put it any fucking way you like but get out and leave the perfect yolk of my happiness unbroken. Look, a blood blob! Hover oh

broody whatsit of the soul that no catch may hitch the hatch ho ho and likewise gloat. Forgive this intrusion of effusion into our staid correspondence but the team has won and like as how ah'm no hand at speechifying I'd just like to sock it up you in the moonlit crypt or Romeover and Julietagain. My love if it's the screw you want just come back here and I'll wire you for sound and make your arse light up in neon red. I read the sentence over and over again and it still said I will come back at Christmas. Surely there is some mistake. But I know now there is none, and how could there be with a girl like you. If I had never thought of you until this moment I would love you for ever. But hang on, I must get a grip on myself. You ask me for advice and sober judgement. Ahem. Well, as before, the only source of these is your own lovely head. What do you want to do? Forget about everybody else and practice the art of egoism, a forgotten art currently vulgarised as selfishness. Selfishness means using others for your own ends, what I mean is a withdrawal from the claims of others and an evaluation in camera, then a new deal with the knowledge you gain. If you suddenly realize that all along you've had an urge to geld your father this doesn't mean you rush out to the ironmongers but that you include the possibility of doing so with all the other feelings you may have such as love pity duty and all that crap. But it's these last that normally get all the play

and we're forever encouraged to deny ourselves for others. Fatal course for ourselves will not be denied and if we neglect them they will take their revenge. Witness me your religious spinsters who are unfailingly submissive and make a yellow world where the meek are persecuted but will inherit and man will we suffer then. You can get a hint of what's in store by the way they treat their dogs. Thus the fate of those who regard their egos as death duties. What I mean by this lecture is, glancing at my watch, that you must decide if you really want to come back at Christmas or if this is a penance which you feel you must undergo for the good of your soul. You don't sound very convinced. Well you have all the facts, but if you really feel you have to stay the year then do, it's no use you turning up here and then nagging me for cheating you of kangaroo land. God knows what you see in the place, said he never having been nearer it than the Northern line, but there it is and there you are and here I am and where are we? Well, in spite of what I claimed last week about the Christmas deadline, naturally it isn't really as clear cut as that. Now that you've actually said, come to say, that you'll come home, I feel almost strong enough to last out the year if you feel that's really the best way. This isn't charlatanism, it's the difference between a year spent because you would not come back to me and a year spent after you said you would. A year sealed up with that promise will keep

fresh where a year of never having admitted the difficulty would not. But all this is only provisional love, because I know you can be trusted to see things the way they are. What I want for Christmas is you, and no other present will do.

It was a lovely lovely letter and made me feel so happy. I felt a tremendous release feeling and started to cry. Thank God Sheila was out, she'd have ruined everything by giggling. You're right, as always, I do feel a need to stay out here until my year is up. It's like having a baby or something I suppose, you may not like the pain and restrictions but you feel somehow you've got to last it out. I mean coming home now would be like having an abortion, it would leave me feeling all empty and robbed, like stealing money from your parents. I'm getting a bit tangled up here but you know what I mean. What I want to tell you is how great I feel to be free again and to know that it's all right with you and we can both manage. That's the most important thing in people, being able to cope properly, it sets everyone free. I know you'll find it difficult to understand why I like the place, in fact I'm not even sure I do, but it's so very different to what I'm used to, the tremendous expanse of everything. It's exciting and gets in your blood after a while, though at first it terrified me. Please keep writing, I love hearing all about you, it makes the life here complete in a way it wouldn't be

otherwise. I do need your letters and your love to come home to, like tea and toast when you've been out walking. What messed us up before was always being together whether we wanted to or not. I don't mean we should always be apart or anything, but that we can make sense of this separation by living it out, exploring it, instead of just waiting and moping. I've hung a print of that painting I was telling you about on the wall of my bedroom. I didn't really expect them to have prints or anything like that out here the whole place is so urban and hard but they do, a department full of them in one of the big stores. I bought some jazzy material too and I'm making a dress to go with my tan. I imagined all the men would be tough steel stomach lifeguard types, but most of them are just ordinary looking and have pot bellies at thirty with all the beer they drink.

Love, love, love. What can I say? I thought at the time it was nothing, now I find it is everything. You will think me abominably weak, and perhaps I am, perhaps it is my love which is strong. But when I said in my joy reconsider I did not mean this, this snatch from my hand. I suppose what I really meant was think it over but come to the same conclusion. I am glad you are happy, but somehow there is something else too, something that should not be in there. You seem to be happy because I appeared to absolve you from facing the unpleasant but necessary dilemma, the decision you had made, to come

home. But I didn't mean to do that. There are times when it is better to be unhappy than happy, if happiness is just wishful thinking. And yet I said it would be alright, I know, and when I said it I really thought it would, in a way I still do. How can I tell you? It is not so much what you say frightens me as your tone of voice. But why should I object to you being happy? Is it just that I'm not? For I am not. One simple thing love, please send me a recent photograph of you, of your face. I spend all my time consuming myself, wondering how you look, what you're doing, who you are out there. I have the time difference worked out in my head like a calculation table, my day begins at its close, at ten in the evening, when you waken up at eight out there if I've got it right, unless your letter surprises me like a stranger at the door whose blank face tells me nothing and then everything, your big scrawly round writing. Oh my love my love, if I could only speak a word to you, one word and a look and you would be in my arms and safe. Can't you see how we only work together? Apart I go all flabby and helpless and you grow light and drift. I don't remember you telling me about any painting though perhaps you did. But I'm not in a mood to care about paintings and pretty claptrap, you are the only real thing. Well if I must wait I must and will. But don't rub salt in love, just remind me gently of your presence as if you were sitting quiet in the room with me, everything said.

I'm not trying to rub salt in your cuts or anything else, I'm simply trying to tell you the way I see our relationship right now. I know how you feel better than you may think, but you mustn't become all mawkish, it's not fair to me to make me feel a creep because I'm trying to evaluate where I stand and live by it. I can't just come running back because you've decided you can't live without me all of a sudden. Anyway, if you're so keen to see me why don't you come out here? But no, it's me who has to uproot and put myself out. You will see that isn't fair. Anyway it's no use putting me on a pedestal as if I was something tremendous. You know I'm not. Why don't you try and get out and meet some other girls to spend the year with? Life is much more fun when one has a lover. Try and find something useful and interesting to do, I know I'm sounding like a social worker but honestly you make me. You mustn't pin all your hopes on me. It puts an unfair strain on me and anyway it's artificial, you don't know what I'm like now or what I will be like next year. So let that wait and stop inventing an ideal version of me and beating me with it. I hate having to write things like this to you but you must see that nothing will be altered by pretending that we're always going to be the same as we were last year. Anyway how come you've only realized what a marvel I am now I've left? Anyway this is all stupid and childish. Let's try and behave like mature human beings and not spoilt

children.

I haven't written until now because I couldn't find any words, anything I thought of was at once undermined by the way I knew you would read it and be offended. But look love, cut out the epistle to the provincials bit will you? 'Why don't you try and meet some other girls', Jesus Christ have you no idea what I'm like at all? I'm talking about love, not tuft hunting. I don't want girls, I want one very special girl who I thought I was writing to, but it begins to look as though she's got lost somewhere. What are you thinking of, or who? I'm the man you lived with for two years, remember? You're right about sounding like a social worker but it's no joke, at least not to me, and shouldn't be to you if you care even about yourself. Otherwise one day you'll drop the qualifying clause and the joke will have become fact and your view of yourself. If you must hurt me then for God's sake do it face to face in a human way and don't try and deny the pain you're causing by suggesting fatuous remedies which could only appeal to smart cunts who would never feel what I feel now in the first place. Also I asked for a recent photo, not a family snapshot taken last summer. I know what you looked like then but a lot seems to have changed in the meanwhile and if it has then it will be there in your face, not sweeping changes, just a different direction. Have you noticed how faces point? I mean the actual features are only figures indicating the

shape of the real face, which someone who loves you will find a breath away from the mask you wear, just where you closely sense the other a moment before your lips actually touch theirs. This should not be confused with halitosis which is remediable, I am talking of the symptoms of a disease whose source and nature are unknown. You say you're bound to change, change, a nice discreet word. And for you no doubt a nice interesting experience. But for someone who loves you and has to look on helpless, speechless, knowing that every word he says will be misinterpreted, is already being misinterpreted, then change is not just an idea he can nod to and forget about. I feel already as if I'm writing to a stranger, arrogantly making all manner of unjustifiable assumptions, but my letters were addressed to you. Where have you got to, why did you move away? But the worst of it is that this tone of voice of yours is not new to me, I remember it from when we lived together. But then I could tease you out of it, make you see, now you are too far away, I need your help to succeed and your stern cunning guardian will not let me near you, she intercepts my letters and you never read them, only a garbled version she dictates to you. It is our selves that have come between us love, for somewhere you are soft and kind and understanding still, and I am undemanding, reasonable and quiet. But our nasty selves yap and yatter like two lawyers we have

hired to mask our ignorance of the law. Still since I must try and answer you, try you and understand me. Why don't I go out there? Don't think I haven't thought of it, but there are reasons which seem to me more strong than my wish to see you any time and anyhow. For a start off it would take me years to earn the fare and I could never get a job out there to go to, I'm living from week to week here as it is. Also and far more important I know for a fact that I would be violently unhappy in that sort of country. I need the moisture and shade of this land to keep me running smoothly, out there I would simply sieze up. I know this must sound selfish, but in the long run what good would it do us for me to try and join you in a place where I know I would only decay and perhaps infect you too? After all love won't stick people together if they're being pulled apart in their everyday life. If we both loved it or both hated it or both ignored it then it would be all right. But what would happen is that you would adapt as you apparently have done, I would not, and we would spend our time squabbling. But I don't know, all this sounds weak and feeble and useless, God knows what you will think of it. But I don't care what you think of it or of me my sweet, I'm tired and all I know is that I want you, I won't say more than that, I want you. But if I'm mistaken about that then I must be a hopeless idiot. I want your chat and

your laughter and everything that is you, and the town needs you too, so that we can look at it and insult it and make love in it. At present I can only tell a house from a speck in the eye when I think how we might be living there, together, and taking our happiness and wretchedness and rows as they come. For what sickens me most about this bloody separation is not the pain it causes me, nor do I think that life with you would be all strawberries and cream. But what is intolerable in isolation is the uselessness and unreality of the pain, unrelated to anything in sight. What I miss most is not being able to have a good row with you, for that is a live thing, you are free to fight back or stalk out or shoot me or something, here I can only throw a book at the wall, which stares back with the same blank disinterest. Nothing we can do will make the world care. That is why only with another person can we ever find that tension, that doubt, that hope, without which life is literally nothing but a game of patience. The quarrel with ourselves, as the man said, produces only poetry, and who wants bloody poetry?

I don't know what to say to you, you sound so plausible and kind and understanding one minute and then start making me out to be some kind of monster. But I'm not and I'm not going to let you make me feel rotten again just when I'm starting to find my feet out here. You say the only thing for me to do is come back and start

struggling along again, Christ don't you understand anything about me? You can't, or you would never have written that. I hated all the time I spent in that miserable town with its grey houses and cloud and false false sunshine. I feel exactly the same about that place as you do about this. Wherever we finally end up it'll have to be better than that. And here the life is open and brisk, I have enough money not to have to scrape and niggle like we did for three years. Beer with the meal isn't everything but it's a start. We spend every weekend on the beach, along with everybody else in the city it seems. I was terrified of sharks at first but after a bit you forget about that. As you see from the address I've moved, it's a much better place in the suburbs, near the sea. The bus is very inconvenient though, I think I'm going to try and get a car. Tell me about your own life, how you spend the day and so on. And don't despair, life is too short to waste being miserable.

My sweet foxy love, I'm not trying to make you out to be a monster. You'd make a rotten moster. All I'm trying to do in my feeble way is make love to you, in the old sense of that phrase before it came to mean just a good screw. Though I wouldn't exactly mind it meaning that either, but even the ingenious me can't manage to lay you between the sheets of a letter. I spent a happy hour last night thinking of myself meeting you again, trying

to imagine the closeness and incredible coarseness of experience applied to this you who have gone all runny in my mind from distance, bleary eyes trying to see further than eyes can. I still find you lurking about the town though, in the library that I had not seen since the summer you pounced on me like an interior sprung pussy cat from a shelf of books, M to N, where you had once pulled me over on the lever of your finger and read me in low tones some fatuous ponderer pondering the imponderable, and I laughed out loud, having rolled up the rest of the library, and the snotty woman at the desk inspected me sternly as if I were overdue or defaced. What would I have done if you'd suddenly appeared, I wonder. Just melted in a pool on the marble floor I suppose, leaving a nasty mess for the cleaners to clear up. How do I spend the day? Well unless I happen to be teaching I get up at twelve, drop a boiled egg down my throat, pour a coff of cuppee after it and then proceed to the can, one floor down. It's an original crapper, open the hatch and make a wish before you hear the splash fifty feet below. Unfortunately although I worship faithfully every morning the powers that be have not yet seen fit to grant my desire. Then if it's a letter day I go down to the hall, slowly, savouring each moment of pure possibility before the letter wraps it up one way or the other. Incidentally even in the bog I'm surrounded

by you. A long strip photograph of golden strands and bronzed surfers riding in on succulent waves. It's one of those maddening trick affairs made of one print repeated over and over again, where you can never actually find the join that you know logically must be there. The rest of the day I sit in my room and read or listen to music or stare at the window, not out of it, I can't seem to manage that. Some days when a music teacher somewhere collapses under the strain I go and stand in, teaching a bunch of future door to door salesmen and trainee tarts to appreciate the joys of classical music, also a few piano lessons. I have plenty of opportunity for meeting other women, love, but the more I meet the more I can see only you, who make them all seem dull, featureless, sterile. I've realized such a lot in the past months. All my affairs and desires with girls other than you, I thought they were a result of some lack or weakness in our arrangement. What nonsense. They were, on the contrary, a direct result of its stability and apparent permanence. Without the constant knowledge of you they would not have lasted a moment, as I found out when I tried to support one after you left. They were only possible because of the staple you were and are in my life, games within the security of your rules, brittle descants to your bass. And all the while I secretly longed for the removal of what seemed an obstacle when

it was in fact the one thing that made them feasible, I mean the balance and counter of your love. If only you had never found out about that bitch we might still be together for it would have faded in a week or two anyway. Only when I admitted it I then found myself having to support my choice so as not to appear merely feeble to myself and to you, it was only because I had told you I was in love that I believed it, had to believe it, myself. Not that I'm trying to excuse myself. But I thought you might see clearer, as I am having to. What a silly feeble mess I made of everything good. This is a nuthouse, like all the houses in this town which I think must attract all the eccentrics and layabouts and rejects and duds and queers in the country. In any other town they'd be crushed out flat by the confidence and drive of the place, you know those industrial cities which have the same unaggressive but unquestionable assurance that you scientists have. We know what we're doing and we know we're needed, we made bootstraps and bombs. Well this town has the equivalent vagueness and fear of being found out that musicians and lovers have, knowing that if someone were to ask them in official tones, I say look here what do you so to speak do, they'd have no answer he could understand. This is what people like me sense in the streets, the openness and lack of pressure, a discretion and tact that does not probe our poor reasons for existence with any but the sharpest

and least painful light. It doesn't muck you about, it gives you the alternatives and limits of life itself, not a squabble of irrelevant standards invented by our filthy civilization to squeeze the blackheads it has infected itself with. As you'll gather, I've changed a lot in my attitude to the place. I used to fear and hate it, but now that I've realized its arrogance and bluster is, like my own, only compensation for a basic sense of insecurity, I like it and pity it as a friend. That's another reason why I don't want to leave, it would be like leaving someone who needs you and trusts you, and I'll never be able to do that with an open heart again.

Funny you finding you like the old place after two years of moaning about it every minute. You're right about it being undemanding, that's just why I don't want to face it again. It leave one completely to one's own devices; and if they fail one is left utterly naked. I want a bustly town that carries you over the bad spots, and it sounds as if you do too. The only thing one can do there is sit and gaze at one's own navel. It's just working up to full summer here. I find it strange not having to worry about whether or not the sun will be shining tomorrow. You're wrong about it being necessary to face up to things all the time. How can you expect to have a good time if you simply sit moping in your room? That's what we did for two solid years and I for one am

glad it's over. Life is only bearable if you get out and join in, it's like a slot machine, if you don't put any money in you won't get any cigarettes. When I think of those stinking mean little rooms where we sat cooped up day after day like in prison, it was so stupid. But it's the little things like money and weather make all the difference. My only regret for the time I spent in that town was that it was two years wasted when if I had only had a bit more money and sense I could really have lived instead of just vegetating. And the same goes for home and the whole setup over there. And if I had not made the break and come out here I might have muddled on for years or the rest of my life in the same dreary fashion, nose to the ground. I've bought a car, quite old but it goes. One of the mechanics from the firm had a look at the engine and says it will go for a couple of years before falling to bits. We went out a little way into the interior last weekend. Not as flat as I'd imagined, just this vast expanse of scrub. The sunset was fantastic, absolutely wild rich dark red with all the dust in the atmosphere. I see what you mean about the way you never really stopped loving me. I knew all the time you hadn't really, but it didn't help much. Why don't you get a regular job in the day and have your evenings free and paid for? The evening is the best time and it's easier to live if you know that other people are working and playing at the same time as you.

So it's summer there. Here it's just running into autumn without having realized yet where the road leads. We had the first of the autumn gales last night, it banged and buffeted the house and set the leaves and stars falling. Having a horror of the house falling on its face I retreated to the back of the room to help balance it, actually hugged up against the wall before I caught myself on. The woods on the slopes of the downs are mottled dark green yellow and brown as is each individual leaf, above it all the silk blue sky, below it all, me. I never realized you felt like that about our time together. Admittedly I didn't exactly go out of my way to take you out, but on the other hand you never complained about it much. I thought you liked just sitting and being. How these letters foul the air with their clog of words. All I want is to sit quiet, but not lonely, alone. That is why I love you, you had that rare gift of being silent, not the silence of unspoken thought but the genuine silence of someone at rest. I need that quiet to make my own whole, one's own silence can only ever be a choice, never an achievement.

Went fishing instead. I just sat and watched actually, though I had a swim. It would probably be better if we didn't discuss the past, love. We will only quarrel and there's no point in going into it all anyway. You must make an effort to look forward, or at least around you.

When I think, each night, that this is a night wasted, a night which I could have spent in love with you, then a year is not a length of time but a terrible crime under some natural law. We have only so long to love and to waste a year of our youth, a year when our bodies are fresh and eager, I have a terrible fear that one day we will look back and remember this waste, together or apart, and curse and long. And I don't want that, not that. Anything but to grow old and just one thought, if only I had my time over again. We are making the bed in which we must die love, and when I think of the shame and waste, the blasphemy of this year thrown away then I would scream love love love come back and let's make good it all. Please think over these things, reconsider anything you like but only come back. I love you inside out and every way. All you say I agree with, I'll take you out every night oh my love, anything, but what use all this spirit and loving with ten thousand miles between us? I don't even know where bloody Australia is, which way from my window to aim the weak rays of my mind. I feel I'm losing you more completely than ever, that word ever, I feel it waiting its turn, jumping the queue to cut me from you before we've even been able to clean out the wound. What am I talking about. I send you a photograph of us I found, taken a year ago. You're wearing that blouse you made from curtain material and your bleached green jeans in which I

always picture you, white socks and I think your plim-solls. The bag in your right hand contains the evening paper, a packet of paper handkerchiefs, cigarettes, the black purse, a paperback novel, a letter and two apples, one half eaten. Your right hand contains mine, the rest of me in that woolly shirt you gave me and my old jeans with the chancy fly. The day is hot and windless, I am hot and mindless, you are warm and adorably plump and hopelessly lovely and worrying about whether your hair looks negligently nice or just messy and remembering to remember to ask me to give you back your vanity mirror which I borrowed three weeks before and have lost. Oh come and see me my sweet and only love and I'll give you a mirror big enough to lose yourself in and find, coming out the other side, that the shutter has clicked and we can move again, anywhere you want to go.

The summer's really got moving now, I hadn't any idea what the heat could be like out here. You were quite right about the difference a year's going to make, I hadn't realized. It will mean a fresh start. Well, perhaps that's not such a bad idea. The woods around town sound lovely, they are always pretty at that time of year, long as you don't have to go on looking at them. Have you seen any of the people we used to know? I wonder what became of the pussies. I don't imagine their relationship would be affected much by anything, they're probably muttering together somewhere even now. How

dead and unresponsive people are really, they miss such a lot it's stupid. The car broke down in the street yesterday and caused a traffic jam, I think I was using the wrong oil or something.

Do you know what you are doing to me? Any idea? And do you see what is happening to yourself? But what is the use of me talking to you when every word will simply be written off as so much sentimental waffle from the past, the past you have elected to drop from your life like a bad habit. I don't know if there's any point in going on writing to you, I could not achieve less by silence. And yet you used to be so tentative and gentle, I don't recognize this hard young woman at all. Please mister, can I have my love back? Well, this is how the story always ends, isn't it? Healthy girl refuses to be trapped by sickly male who is left to his antisocial solitude while she pursues an integrated and wholesome career and lives life to the full. Of course you could never really have come back, I never really expected you would. It would have been too inventive, too deeply creative a gesture ever to happen in this world. Life, to borrow your platform a moment, is a soap opera turned inside out. The same fixed and irrevocable contrived patterns, but the reassurance turned to claustrophobia, the lucky breaks to cracks in the earth, the flawless mediocre content to constant painless

dreary dumps, the mechanical happy ending to a routine eventless vulgar fraction without end of any kind. We are always free to make it better of course, but, well it would be too showy and difficult, too much like a book, too many words, too many notes. Let's try this new scientifically proved brand of washing powder instead. It's new, shiny, comes in six exciting flavours, doesn't stain or tarnish and everybody is doing it, that the important thing. Positively no risk involved, this doesn't involve you in any obligation. And I have done this, oh that is the worst of it all, how can I tear this paper with my nib to show you. Look, I will pack up here and somehow come out to you if that's still all right. It's not the best way but the only one now. Anything but this fucking aimless bloody maundering on paper. I never want to use paper ever again in my life but to wipe my arse with. Is that all right? I mean about me coming out there. I feel I'm shouting through a closed door into a room without knowing if you're still in there. Anyway my balls are in your court. Be gentle. And perhaps use ink to reply, biro tends to make one a bit slick.

This is a hard letter to write. I don't know how to say it so that you will have no excuse to reproach me. I think you are right about there being no point in our going on writing like this, we only seem to misunderstand one another's motives. And I'm not sure I can support

your emotional dependence on me indefinitely. There would be no point in your coming out here, you've already said you would hate it and what good would that do? We must try and find our own stability and integrity in our own ways. You will always represent an important factor in my life and when I return I should like to see you again. But I can't be sure at the moment how long I want to stay here or what it will mean to me when I leave. Anyway this relationship by post is tiring and useless. I do like hearing about you and your way of looking at things is often refreshing, I mean keep writing if you want to. But I'm not sure if I can love two people at the same time. There must be changes of all sorts in store and I'm not sure how I will react to them. So it might be safer not to count on me too much.

I can still remember the day that I received this letter, it remains visible as the end wall of a terrace. It was a bright chill autumn morning and I was going to a town some miles inland, where I was teaching that week. The letter I saw on opening the door to go out snapped me like old rope, for it had been five days overdue and each morning the same intolerable lack that left the day a dull duration. I carefully put off reading it until I was sitting safely in the train. I knew that this must be in some sense it, for I had appealed to you on a level you could not merely gloss over as you did

my feelings. Things like departure and arrival were apparently the only realities you recognized any more, so surely this one letter would at least not be just a bored chat ignoring everything I had wrecked and ransacked my feelings to make clear. The train was just going over that high rim of a viaduct outside the station when I reached the sentence which was the last I read, though not the last you wrote. I have had to completely invent the end of your letter, for although I distinctly remember that the black scrawl continued over on to the verso of the airmail form I never got any further than the words which gave me the greatest shock of my life, and then dropped my hand with the letter and looked out of the grimy window, through whose patina of dirt I saw the loins of the town in its valley and, beyond all the roofs, the bright twinkle of the sea breaking up on the beach before my house. It will tell you the intensity and limitation of my love when I say that not once in all the weeks of our vacillation had I considered the possibility of your having fallen in love with someone else. It struck me at first like a misprint, then at once I realized that it was I who was at fault and had misread. I thought back over the long weeks patterned with handwriting and stretched out like galley proofs. Of course. It all began to make some sense. The hardening of tone I had not been able to relate to a girl I knew, even if she were changed and abroad, became simply the

gleam of the sink revealed as affection drains away. I knew so well that tight disinterest in what abruptly becomes a past sheared from the blinding present, turned the final inch between what does not change and what cannot, since the eye given a longer pitch will no longer distinguish the insect on the desk. What I could not absorb at one sitting was the knowledge that it was all over, completely and utterly finished. Oh of course we might meet again, may still for all I know or care, but this was dead, this feeble attempt to preserve the circuit by taking past and future in my two hands and using my body as a conductor, this attempt which had caused me continuous excitement and pain, it was over. The lead to the future, to the present, was snatched away, and I was left with all the dead massive machinery of my memories shining and for ever stilled and useless, historical curiosities housed from the world which no longer needs them in a museum of which I am curator. But this knowledge, which I have come to live with if not to accept, did not become clear to me until I tried, later that evening, to formulate a reply. Only when I had run through the entire stock of possible reactions and openings did I realize that there was only one which was in any sense valid, silence. Any move or sound appeared so pitifully inadequate that I realized finally what I had known all along but refused to accept, been unable to bring myself to, that there was simply nothing more to be said, only

the eternal silence that binds lovers together and keeps others apart, only that, to be endured. There is no flaw in the quality of that silence, in our loneliness we hear what we heard in love, only alone the silence seals us not to another and a new found world but to the whispering sniggering self whose outgoing dissipation and resolution in love is turned in upon itself to confuse and paralyse. And between our silences we have that amateur telephone service called talk and the even more hilarious postal system. But try as we will, knowing from too much experience what the result must be, still it is impossible not to trust those bright young postmen and their beautifully and inexhaustibly complex system for making my thought yours and yours mine again. Time and time again they continue to deliver letters to the wrong door, so that one is constantly getting mail intended for someone else, even though they often lose a letter completely, even when it becomes clear that for a letter to reach intact the person to whom it was sent is a phenomenon so rare as to be practically inconceivable, even then one glance at their eager faces, one view of the incredibly complicated sorting machines and delivery routes is enough to send one hopefully again to the desk and the pen. For while it is obviously true that most of these people are new to their job and really have very little idea how to use all the facilities they have inherited, nevertheless they are so anxious to please, so hopelessly willing as they cross

out the original name on a misdirected letter and pencil in your own to reassure you, as they work overtime inventing whole letters to replace those lost or destroyed, one feels that surely this time, with such a wealth of potential and goodwill, surely this time everything will be all right.

Think of the appalling ache and tenderness that drives us to the stupidity of letters and argument, when all that racket only makes the silence more difficult to hear clearly, paints it up in garish and confusing colours. The silence of another person being, if only we could be content with that, if only become humble enough to praise a world in which I am permitted to listen to your silence.

It occurred to me shortly afterwards that you had purposely spun out our correspondence long after you had lost any real interest in it, simply waiting until my position became such as to give you a clear kick at my crotch. This would explain why you suddenly came to the point after so many weeks of ambiguity, it would explain the exquisite placing of that blow wrapped up in its cloudy context, the anonymous two people, the delightfully tactful way you left it for me to guess which of the two would have to go. It was stylishly done my dear, whether by intent or from embarrassment, and I hope you got some pleasure out of your belated but definitely final

laugh, for it was certainly due and I am glad to say it hurt me abominably and made me squeal like a little piggy. It also killed you, I mean you, the girl I loved and who only exists now in my brain and perhaps a little in these pages, if indeed she ever existed anywhere else. No, that's unnecessary. But once I had got over the initial shock I found recovery much less difficult than one might have thought. I found a loophole you see, in the coarsening your mind had displayed in those final letters. At the time I had supposed this to be due to a forcing of your self over your sensibility, owing to the danger of the latter giving in to me. Later on I thought of other and darker reasons, but whatever the cause the result was that-I have never had to give up my soft and witty love at all, only the clumsy and banal woman who replaced her. And this person, with her babble about nothing, her cosy reliance on jargon about relationships, her lack of any of the ordinary human decencies such as making some attempt if not to return then at least to show some sign of appreciating the existence and depth of a defenceless lover's feelings, her inability to end gracefully a contact which bored her, her complete and utter misunderstanding of things my love would have grasped before I had finished the sentence, the passing of this breezy beauty did not unduly trouble my days. Though there were moments, oh even in the letters there were moments, glimpses. But they did not last, I put them out. Did I

make it as easy for you in the summer, love? I think I must have helped, being so similarly brutal and crass and cheap. So after a few weeks of agony and indecision I realized one day that there was nothing more to be done, tore up the letters, forgot about this other girl and reverted to my first and only love.

From time to time of course I have been worried by the apparent fact that my dead girl is alive and well and living on the other side of this allegedly spherical world. In general these hints of a torment to disturb the quiet decay of a mind preoccupied with the past have been connected with the doubts churned up later when I gradually got the whole affair within my sights, in fact when the letters and final break had sunk deeply enough into the past to be visible to the eyes I carry in the back of my head, the only ones that can see clearly. But there is time enough to deal with that at the end, for there will have to be an end soon, though not the one I looked for. It seems this tussle with the past which I began so confidently has somewhere been turned aside, I no longer feel as if I am fighting my disease tooth and nail but rather encouraging it, selling what remains of me not already pawned for a few sweet memories. But of course while I know now I cannot write my way into life again, it is equally true that however many times I succumb along the way it is only the last round that actually counts. It is the way I lay down my pen after

the last word and get up from this swaying table and go that will decide it, for what is all this really but my deadness written out to be thrown back and give me momentum forward? I cannot hope to contradict the hermetic past or to shame it into life, but I can perhaps fling it away from me with sufficient force to leave me no alternative but to go out and try again. Perhaps this is all bluster, but I feel slightly chirpy tonight, hence all these metaphors as if I were having a nice clean fight with a tangible and separate entity and not trying to fix a streaky strain which is half or more my being.

So while from time to time I wonder vaguely what status this living person has, in truth I no longer concern myself with her. If she were to come back and we met, then I suppose I should feel a nasty upset, for however her mind might have thickened her face would still be yours, her mouth still that thin piece of warmth that smiled nervously as it was kissed by this creepy crawling on hands and knees over to where you sat in your dress and sweater, examining the corns on your left foot hooked over right knee for the purpose. Yes, that would all be the same, and the jump between that and the mind set like concrete could never quite make sense. Or still worse if she turned out to be you, still deliciously the same and adorably there and real and with some gangling surf champ riding your board every night down the longest

wave in the world. For sometimes I wonder, bearing in mind that your letters even when I knew you were usually trite and often thoughtless, as before our summer holidays, I wonder if in fact I have not invented this new coarser you to defend myself from the unbearable loss of the original. But here we go round the mulberry bush. Choose your illusion and stick to it, they're all equally meaningless in the end and any one will see you through to that end.

My real fear in realizing that it was all over was not the loss of you but my inevitable return to the empty tensionless state in which I had passed the summer. How we see ourselves decides how we see the world. Our ability to carve the spongy mess of things into line and shape depends upon our fiction of ourselves, follows from it and is determined by it. But I had staked all the meaning of my life upon the necessity of our love, this was the only future I saw and fixed my sight the more singly on it to convince you too. To achieve that I had directed all my powers to one end, that end gone there was no obvious alternative, each possibility was as possible as the rest and all equally unlikely. I shrank from an embarrassment of choice with no detail to distinguish one from another. Alone, each wave of depression or muted discontent has the moon behind it and brings the walls down round your head, any casual glance in the street calls in question your very right and reason in

being there, or anywhere. All those long weeks until Christmas I wandered aimlessly through a house without mirrors and every object I saw, every surface I touched threatened constantly to slip and reveal the absence of itself. It was the most naked time I have ever spent, and I do not wish to see it again. The town itself, so solid, moved around behind the screen that held everything from me by my inability to select and live with any one point from which to view it. The world, a very skillful torturer, never hurt me enough to put me beyond its reach. For if you call its bluff, if you can say confidently, yes I know I am here and you are there and so what, then the world looks slightly embarrassed and coughs and starts washing itself like an outfaced cat. Or rather it has just been there, getting on with it all along, and no more comes and goes than the stars leave their circuits to appear before the man on whose head a grand piano has just fallen.

Most of the time we naturally do not concern ourselves with these abstractions, as long as they remain abstract we do not need to. But I found myself being forced to care. Indeed this is the nature of the bluff. For as long as you can ignore your position, bound up in immediate affairs, then it will not affect you. It is not a problem with which we occupy ourselves, rather the fact of occupying ourselves with it is itself the problem.

For instance I found myself paying attention to the placing of objects. Say a newspaper so folded that it is not quite halved, the crease making a wrong angle with the edge. So without thinking I pick it up and refold it, exactly. But now it looks too tidy and ordered, it stands out in relief on the table and distracts my eye from the book it is supposed to be reading. Newspapers do not look like that. But how do they look? I try muddling up the pages a little, to make it look more natural. But this is even worse, now it looks really contrived. It is no use, I know there is no such thing as a natural way for a newspaper to be. They just lie any way they're left. But if that is true of newspapers then it is true of every object in the room, and every object. The moment you ask yourself why these books and cups and cigarette butts are where they are a grotesque pattern emerges, a whole chart of angles and relations and distances, completely random. Yet if you set about tidying them into an order, at once that order appears fragile and arbitrary, a pretty plan devised by you. Think about it for long enough and you will go mad, surrounded by a world of things which have no reason for being where they are and no reason for being anywhere else. What meaning can punctual trains have for the lifer in jail, or houses for I who have nothing to do in them, no interest in people who are not you, no thoughts which do not include your participation and no possibilities which do? I found

myself incapable of imagining a future without you, and was forced to exploit the past from sheer lack of invention. At every turn I unthinkingly apply the old strategy, you my love, my old strategy puss, and a reeling moment later realize it is no longer relevant. And then the sick withdrawal, in which the past is abused for lacking the dimension of change and the present rejected for possessing it. The world is made for creatures without memory who, like the birds, might celebrate each new dawn as new, a gratuitous building of light out of darkness never broken before.

In itself the freedom of having absolutely no ties and no connection with anyone or anything is exhilarating. If the sun shines and the wind is in the right quarter and you can involve yourself sufficiently in your little selfimposed routines to forget how completely rigged it all is, then you feel a curious lightness and invulnerability which is very pleasant, as long as you don't try and test it by stepping off the window ledge. And of course my draughty sense of being superfluous to requirements meant only a constant threat, occasionally breaking into presence. I had some nasty moods when I felt I wanted a breakdown, as a woman in labour wants her baby. The walls were so blank and I could do nothing. I usually ended up hurling my books one by one at the door, until the quiet morose student in the next room came in to see what was the matter. And then he would take me

in and give me a cup of coffee and tell me his life story, which was sad and funny and diverting. He too had been living with a girl for several years, and the long and involved parting had left him in his own way as broken as myself. I asked him why they had separated. He shrugged and stared at the hissing gas fire. She wanted to marry Mozart, he said eventually.

But in general the bleakness remained behind, and in the foreground enough happened to keep me sane. Besides, I was always planning, always hoping that at any moment the new girl, the new mystery would appear. Not today, but tomorrow, sometime. I had not learnt then about the reflex which condemns the new sight unseen and sends me mumbling back to my memories. And although I never came across that originality I sought in a human way, it was mine in the wild distant beauty of those days. That was of the town, of my room. White bare walls buckled and bent in the old warped house, densely cold. And outside the incredible blue expanse of sky, the streaming liquid air, from my window the sun lying on the grinding surface of the sea, transposed for human eyes to a glittering toccata of light. The mornings so bright and trusting, hard blocks of shadow and the cold air burnishing the skin of hands and face. I went out to get a paper and some eggs, half a pound of butter, some coffee, depending on what was short. And as I stretched and yawned in the

exuberance of the morning it was over. When I went out again for a walk, down to the front, to the library, just to get out, the light had already softened from diamond to pearl, the waves broke carelessly and from the promenade I could see the power station we once passed on a walk, blurred as though through gauze. How typical of us to dismiss death as an end and then idealize it as a beginning, when in fact it is neither beginning nor end but the time between, a fine thin muslin covering everything and everybody, absolutely transparent, making just that difference as when you cover one eye with your hand. It is everywhere and always there, we are coated with it, only what we see is usually so important and interesting in itself that we forget about the gap between, as watching from a window we are not aware of the glass. But then the street empties, it is cold in the room, the window remains.

And in my room on the very edge of the town I sat and watched the morning brilliance turn to the tired pastel shades of the afternoon. Between three and five was the worst time. By five it was dark and I could put on my coat and go out to fetch my dinner. I had to eat, but I soon grew weary of even this wedge of planned time driven into my purposeless days. I resented having to go to the lavatory. Finding I had run out of cigarettes and had to go out again drove me to a rage. I went the same route evening after evening to a fish and chip shop

nearby and bought two sausages in batter and a shilling of chips. Back through the bitter night, the heat of the chips warming my palms while the knuckles ached. I rolled the sausages in a slice of buttered bread and munched my way through them and the lukewarm chips. Rolled up the greasy paper and tossed it on to a growing pile under the sink. Cigarette, steaming powdered coffee. Afterwards I listened to records, read a book until my hands became stiff with the cold, glanced for the umpteenth time at an old newspaper, as if it might have grown new pages overnight. I returned to my old pre-occupation with wallpaper. This one was easy, I solved it at first glance. I built my little stratagems like a house of cards, infinitely fragile and with great gaps, but nowhere could I find the perspective that would have woven everything together of its own accord, my life remained a ragbag of separate ways of passing time. The music stopped, the chapter ended and there was the glaring hiatus, the general pause for thought, until finally there was nothing left but to go to bed, a rest not earned but resorted to for want of any alternative.

And then the dreams. There you became an enigmatic figure whose face I could never see clearly. You came quietly and stood at the foot of my bed in a night-dress, props borrowed from a film I had seen. I lay knowing it was you, though your face was in shadow, out of focus. A voice called your name and you turned slowly

and retired into the darkness, looking round, walking away, looking round. You were in danger. Daylight, you stood fully dressed in a strange dull costume. You were broken and lonely and in terrible need of love and help and I knew I was the only person who understood this, the only person who could help, could love you. But you looked at me and smiled in a tired way and shook your head. You did not trust me, you were beyond my reach. You smiled, tired and sad and final. How could I ever prove my intention was good? And you returned through a giant folding door with false sides, through it you were nowhere to be seen. A figure lead you away and your smile meant, thank you but no, I know they don't understand me but anything is better than the understanding we had and you used to hurt me. By doing that you've put yourself out of reach for ever, nothing can cancel the fact of that cruelty. How can I ever love anyone heart whole again? I have lowered my sights. I do not give all of myself. You abused my innocence and my trust and they will never heal properly. I make do with less now.

And the night I was eyes without a head in a room where a man in a white coat was bent over a girl on a table and using a sharp knife between her legs and the blood on her thighs and on his coat and her screaming was my own. I woke with my teeth biting the pillow wet with spit.

Mornings walking in the blistering air held no pockets of consolation. Whatever moments came my way were mine alone and I lived them out one by one as long as they lasted. Gradually the other tenants leaked enough details to form a picture of the house. We were a great set. In the basement an old man, lonely and mad, who hid behind some obscure mystic faith but betrayed himself by an excessive desire to talk when I met him by accident in the porch. His windows, giving on to the area where the rats ate the garbage, were curtained with dirt. On the first floor the windows were shuttered and the door locked. The room was said to be empty, but going upstairs one day I heard a telephone ringing inside. No one answered. For some reason I became convinced that the landlady's late husband was lying in there embalmed in a glass coffin. When I told the girl who lived off the next landing about this she tittered politely. She was a specimen of the bedsit bluestocking, a common and sad bird which tickles its mind because no one will tickle its body. We had coffee a few times and I took her out once, but I could not face the prospect of mentally undressing her, an inevitable prelude to taking her clothes off. The pair in the adjoining room, directly beneath my own, fascinated me from the start. They were simply the most beautiful couple I had ever seen. If I were rich I should have hired them just to be about my house. They never seemed to speak above a whisper,

their talk limited to single phrases which they exchanged as tokens meaningless outside their complete tradition of intimacy. They invited me down for a meal once and I went and basked in the harmony of their chat which modulated unexpectedly and originally, creative on a given base. They could express more love without trying in a few words about boiled potatoes than any of us could in passionate pronunciamientos of eternal faith. But while I loved their company, and they apparently quite liked my talk, nevertheless I avoided them. For their beauty and serenity only reminded me the more strongly of my own ugly gropings and loose ends, and of the love I had once had and what I had done to it. I was afraid of them suddenly finding me out and recoiling, ashamed of myself before this display of everything I valued and knew myself proven unfit for. Even the girl did not enter the stock of my jaded fantasies. Her small round breasts, firm slender legs, thighs and stomach, delicate face, long smooth hair, she was as beautiful as any girl I had seen, but with a distance that put her as far from mind as a figure in a painting. She simply and perfectly was, and her man with her, inconceivable except in the cool civilized world they created by being. I loved them both and feared them and shut myself away.

On my landing, to complete the house, we had the polite morose student and one empty room to which an occasional night's footsteps and two male voices would

come and play tunes on the bedsprings. A couple of queers, that was all we needed. And, of course, the peculiar nervy silent handsome unstable rowdy arrogant ugly irritable failed fucked and finished amateur human being and sometime professional musician in number seven. And in a big gloomy room downstairs at the back the landlady squatted with her cats and her television set and her murdered husband's deathmask, and gave the dustmen a glass of champagne because it was Christmas. In a slick farce it would all have been a riot, in reality the plot obstinately refused to jell, people refused to step out from behind their image, and when I passed back through the living room Cupid was still trying to get his itching lips to Psyche and her furry brassiere was still fast asleep.

But Christmas it was, ready or not, and resilient old habits had me thinking once again about trains and planes, when it occurred to me that there was no reason for me to move and that the sham gaiety of yuletide with my old friends would be more than I could face. The house gradually emptied as the student and the happy pair and the respected female took themselves off to their various holiday homes. Even the pretty boys across the way did not come any more, or if they did it was somewhere else. Alone I kept the house company, solitary and still as a fish in a block of ice. I lasted out a fortnight that way, company for loose windows and the dripping cistern on the landing outside my door. It was an

incredibly bodiless existence, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It had as few qualities as a glass of cold water, and those the same.

And then one morning I became aware over my boiled egg that someone was playing a guitar in the next room. People had returned, a new year was about to begin or, for all I knew, had already done so. I'd grown so used to the silence that this intrusion into it shook me up. Not that I had any more idea than ever as to what I wanted to do or how to set about it, but the thought of wasting away the new year in the same way as I had the last months of the old grew suddenly unbearable. I was not going through that again. Suffused with a delightful sense of purpose, none the weaker for having no positive aim, I went, actually caught a bus to the station. I had enough money for a plane ticket home and at the airport I bought a seat on the first flight, feeling utterly lunatic but not really caring any more. What was I going to do? Take a holiday, I told myself. What you need is a good rest. I would be returning to town of course, but fresh and keen, full of clear ideas formulated in the free atmosphere of people I liked. I was obviously suffering from a mental freeze, the inertia of habit. What you need is to get things in perspective, take the long view. I took a long view of the cloud ranges, the shuddering slide through them, and then, toned in greens and blacks that are only variations on the basic grey, the handful

of country mapped with roads and tiny fields. It is from all that intimacy of a close landscape I have come out to go lost and crying on this sprawling upland whose eyelash is the horizon.

People were pleased but not unduly surprised to see me, having grown used to my appearing at odd times. I decided I would stay the week, but borrowed some money and booked my flight home first, for I am useless at calculating expenditure and I had no wish to be stuck there indefinitely. It was to be a brief and undemanding break. I visited my friends, increased my alcohol intake and made all the gestures that a lifetime of familiarity with a place prompts at every street corner. I suppose beneath all my rationalizations about perspective and clear thinking there was simply a hope that the country would pull off the trick as it had always done, would grant me a reprieve. For by some combination of old acquaintance not forgot and my own change in the interim, I had never visited the place without it producing a surprise I had never guessed at, turning the old design inside out and showing me a possibility I had overlooked. True it had failed me in the summer, but with most of my friends away and I preoccupied with my own affairs it had no material on which to work. I was giving it another chance and, beautifully, impossibly, it came off. I asked for nothing less than a miracle, having pleaded in vain for a clue,

and it came so easily and unceremoniously that a moment afterwards it was as if everything had been announcing it.

A couple of days before I was due to leave one of my friends told me about a soak they were having, and off I went. And there she was, corduroy skirted and silk bloused, a year older by a time of no importance, exactly as I had seen her a year ago and fallen in love with her, and fell straight back without a word spoken. It was as if a sign of prohibition painted on a board had been wiped clean with a damp sponge. I remembered nothing but the mystery, the love, the hope and possibility sewn up in her small figure. The spirit level was pretty low by the time I arrived and most of the party drunk. I rinsed out a glass with the last of the vodka and suggested the pub. Motion passed on a show of feet. So seamless was the splice between that year and this that I started to worry in case the barman, who had thrown us out then when someone challenged me to a duel with empty beer bottles, would not let us in. I finally ceased to have any doubts when he in fact took one look at us and shook his head. Voices were raised and I began to fear that we were in for a heavy evening with that general decline in the quality of social intercourse which I so much deplore. Not that it mattered, I was invincible and ineffable, which was just as well for the

word was flying freely. She glanced at me and winked solemnly. I produced my corniest old boy accent and the paper notes that make it valid anywhere in the common wealth and suggested a few bottles to take out for consumption off the premises, failing which it would hardly be possible to restrain my companions from acts of mayhem possibly amounting to civil commotion which might well have the effect of lowering the value of said premises by several hundred of the said notes at present readily convertible into wine beer and do not let us forget spirits. Faced with the unassailable logic of hard cash he disappeared and returned with bottles clinking as only bottles can. We turned back along the milky way we had come. I took her arm to prevent her being run over by flying saucers or swimming cups or mugs driving home as plastered with despair as I was with happiness and release when she took and held my arm and leant on me and crabbed down to my hand with her own. And so we walked along the ice pooled pavement to the house.

Inside in the room the cancan was in progress. We retired to the sofa and I produced a small bottle concealed in the pouch where we kangaroos keep our rum. A girl swung stark naked from the chandelier and remarked that she was to be queen of the night mother, she was to be queen of the night. We sat together and watched the hooliganism and lack of restraint without which people today do not seem to feel they are getting their money's

worth. In any normal situation with a girl I would have been thinking of time and opportunity and the present moment slapping my face awake as a gust packed gale at sea, but with her these things meant nothing. There was literally nothing to do, except kiss the queer bent mouth she carried like an open wound. I kissed it and she put her arm around me and held me. I suppose it is not really such a marvellous thing that one person should ask affection from another and get it, but it seems so to me and always will. So simple a gesture as an unprompted touch or spontaneous glance makes my breath cease as though I had seen a corpse get up and dance. There were hundreds of them, doing a gigue, and all dead from the roots of their hair up. A bloke I knew was having a boxing match with the wall, taking it all out on what would not hit back. A loose nail precipitated the monarch of the glen complete with gilt frame some four feet sheer and the game bugger went down, his cheek gored by an antler. I kissed her again. The past is dead sang a choir of castrated mormons in five part harmony. A man in the bog, tastefully converted from the scullery sink by the imaginative daring of the assembled bladders, claimed that it was old and it was beautiful and could slash by far the more. And as the sink tastefully overflowed into the potato and vegetable box I could only agree. I went back and she was still there, there and still and large as the

life to which she had given birth. We went out through the tunnel of hung coats to the front door. It was very cold and bare outside. She had to catch the last bus back to the city. I waited with her at the stop, telling her that I had to go the next day. She nodded as if she had not heard. I knew she felt as I did that since the design was clear the details did not really matter. It did not worry me. We stood, and when the bus came I touched her chill face and she got in and waved, it was all right.

Back at the rave partners were changing and withers being wrung, images getting bent and nightmares coming true. I sat replete and relaxed in a chair, finishing off a bottle of wine and thinking how utterly silly it was of people to be unhappy and try and force things when all the best came of their own accord. I got up and offered this gem of wisdom to the elastoplastered boxer who was now attacking the wall with a broomstick. Old brooms won't sweep clean, I told him, but witches ride them and a witty witch is a joy forever, which witty witch you ask or would if you were not stoned out of your tiny mind, to which I reply and wouldn't unless I was too out of mine, that is the question, which is? He howled sadly and collapsed over a wicker laundry basket. Is the present an imaginative collage which can only be constructed from the litter of the past, I demanded of the two people still on their feet. He climbed the

ladder in her nylons and disappeared from view. I drew the curtains, unscrewed the light bulb, crawled beneath the table and went to sleep.

She appeared late in the afternoon of the following day, silent and subdued. We sat out the dulling hours alone in the cold room, I lit a fire and tried to tell her a little about myself and to find out about her, about whom I knew next to nothing and yet everything that mattered. We talked quietly until it was dark, always skirting the deep water which hides anything for everyone and where words cease to mean, the depths for which the most one can do in conversation is acknowledge their existence by gracefully avoiding them. And how rare is that ability, to find someone who does not either ignore the big questions or try to drag them into words, which only makes the words sound silly. She had that gift and I would have loved her for that alone, if I had needed to choose. But there were never any choices with her, no plans and no excuses. We happened. Someone called dinner and we went down and grubbed our way through it. It struck me then, exposed to others, how fragile a bond ours was, and that fragility and the overpowering tenderness it awoke in me for its perfect image, her slight and vulnerable body, is the only truly human feeling I can remember her arousing in me.

I said goodbye all round and walked with her to the station. We sat together in the drab and banging

train a journey whose time I spent tasting her mouth and searching her hard eyes and the face that was so poor a counterfeit of her spirit. She was sad and living her sadness as she did everything, completely. For myself all depression was held at a distance by the generation of movement in my directed mind. I had found the perspective I longed for, or rather been given it back, and in the person of an old love I had thought lost to the other side of the screen. What I struggled and sweated to save with you was gone, and as if in return I was granted a rebirth I had never hoped for, the startled surfacing of a piece of my life I had thought dead as the days gone by.

At the station we kissed and left for our different buses. I watched her out of sight, knowing she would not turn and wave as certainly as if she were already gone and I reviewing my memory of her. I took my bag and started for the bus.

Back in town I took up the old routine, but with an aim that made it more than that. The town could not frighten me now with its disinterest, I was centrally heated with a knowledge it lacked. I supposed I had found the love of my life. Not that I took anything much for granted, but it seemed impossible that so intricate and yet unpremeditated a gesture could have been made in vain. And the letters began again, as strange and compelling as before, the same fierce style of mind that took

oil and water and fired them together to make mercury, the element in which we moved. Her letters were the montage of a life being lived, never just the debris of a tired mind, and they awoke mine and made me see again, not with her eyes but my own. I sent back screeds of writing torn from my week as easily as wallpaper from old plaster. About the future, though, she remained as tentative as ever. To her it was an enchanted place where only some essence survived and was made free, one could not imagine it without having been burnt through to it. Her sight was not yet tired with seeing tomorrows all debased into just another day, her time was revolution and her future a vision apart. I had my future too, for dreaming of, but in life I wanted some more tangible insurance against the risks of loneliness and self. This she quite rightly felt unable to provide. A year before I would not have cared, for I knew as well as she that neither of us could meaningfully say anything about the future when we were both as unstable as heavy water, when it was this instability itself which lent our exchanges their unlikely power. But the long uncertainty and desperation of my autumn love for you had broken me for the present, perhaps for ever, I was no longer able to risk. From the moment that became clear all my old fears of helplessness at the end of a chain of dried letters returned, confirmed by the curious echo of your hand-

writing I noticed in her own open scrawl.

It occurred to me then, out walking one day in the curdling dusk, that I had no real reason to remain in this town, and every reason in love of her to leave and be with her where any change would at least be visible, where I would be part of the living organism, to adapt and influence as the need arose. The thought of suffering again the impotent shock of loss by letter already made me hesitate before opening each one she sent. But there were no nasty surprises there, she seemed to welcome the idea of my returning to live near her, returning home for good. I cannot recall her words, only the easing in my whole body when she spent half a letter planning the things we could do together and generally making clear that she did not agree with the view everyone else seemed to hold, that I was all right in small doses but otherwise a bit of a drag to be with.

I thought it all over as seriously as I am capable of thinking about something I have already decided. Certainly I did not want to leave town. I was beginning to enjoy the subtle and original freedom of my life here, while on a lower level I knew how long it would take me to get organized again. Here it was all neatly arranged, the teaching and piano lessons which brought in my occasional quids, enough to keep me in food and tobacco and pay the ridiculously low rent for the room I had grown

not to notice in the right way. Nor did I particularly look forward to living at home full time, much as I enjoyed bivouacking there from time to time. But what was all this but sinful lazyness and timidity, a mean concept of life? It was obvious where my positive was and without that the routine, however comfortable, was bound to wear thin and transparent again. In any case who but she had enabled me to see myself, to know whether I liked or disliked the place? It was she who had given me back myself and the town, and since she could not join me there I should have to go to her, wherever she was. I needed to put some body back in my life. And of course there was that too, though desire had only ever been a poor relation of my impulse towards her. Anyway, all this was merely a colourful parade of possible points of view. In my mind the ticket was already bought and I might just as well realize that fact.

One final letter I wrote, to make quite sure she understood what I was doing, that there could be no hidden steps left to trip us. I arranged the day I would arrive and asked her to be in at the time imagination captured me, breathless, ringing the doorbell of her high and windy house. She replied with love, with desire, with wit and with wonder. It was all I needed to convince myself and the morbid landlady that I would no longer be needing the room. She murmured mumbles and enveloped the money I gave her in her purse shaped paw. Her strangled

gigolo grinned inanely from his plastic frame, the cat sneezed and blew its nose into a large linen handkerchief, the student nodded and played another flattened chord, the model girl from the room below whom I met coming up the stairs with her shopping bag stopped and slackened her perfect face with a slight sadness. And I wished we lived in a world where I could have kissed her before leaving as naturally and unremarkably as I said goodbye. Is it my fault I find all women wonderful, however clever or stupid they are, with a beauty that stands outside themselves and a constant ability to make small gestures that strike me as absolutely graceful and touching? Why should this given admiration have to be confused with the quite different climate of love, where I want everything and will not be content with what a girl can call her own?

Since I could not face leaving my room and the town all at once I spent the last night with my friends in their house behind the downs. I was too excited to sleep well, and after a long night of tossing and twisting in my hot bed I went out about dawn for a walk on the downs. Then after breakfast we drove to the station and I caught a train to the airport and some time later found myself, not altogether believing, standing with my bag on the same forecourt from which I had watched her disappear a month before. I hoisted my bag into the left luggage and stepped out into the greasy streets. It was a dull wet afternoon, the latest in a history of low skies and blind

light that has worn the city into its mood of resignation. Waiting opposite the city hall with its lines of pigeons adding their icing to the heavy stonework, standing there for the bus I gazed round at the familiar skyline. Somehow it was all too easy, too quick. Only that morning I had been walking the downs, wind whittled to a shard of bone, and it was still that air I was breathing, that whole light my eyes were tuned to. I saw the city as a tourist, it remained vague and inaccessible, with none of the weight, the mass I had come to fill myself with. But that could wait. I was very tired after my restive night and the journey, and thought how marvellous it was that just when I was feeble and helpless I could put myself in the only hands I knew could be trusted to feel me gently and not ask questions.

The matter of fact bus appeared and trundled me slowly up the forked streets, up the hillside. I got out, trembling from more than exhaustion as I walked over the pitted cobblestones, trembling with the charge of emotion about to be unloosed. Oh her soft mouth, her voice as raw with experience as my own. I crossed the road and went up the steps to the blue door, rang the bell. She appeared, smaller than I remembered. Her face tight. What kept you? she said peevishly, you're nearly an hour late.

Sheer shock kept me silent for a moment, then

mumblings took over. Sorry. My eyes pawed her face frantically. A joke of some kind? She stood prim and unamused in the hall. I realized then how very weary I was, that whatever the proper reaction to all this was I was not going to find it, and that it did not really matter because everything was all right, had to be all right really. But then meeting someone face to face after a long separation is not the easiest thing to bring off, rather like the old western stunt of changing horses at the gallop, you need a fair amount of cooperation between the horses. Why was she, normally so sensitive to hangups of any kind, apparently going out of her way to make it hard for us to be natural? I had no wit left to decide or even properly pose the question. All I knew was that I was defenceless and silly, and since I could not rise to any thought I could only admit everything and anything and throw myself completely on her mercy and love. Afterwards of course I flayed myself for this, for she was the kind of bitch who only hits weakness the harder. When I considered the unjust cruelty I took that evening without retaliation, when I thought of the openings I had let pass and all the battery of sarcasm and cunning I left unused in the one instance when it would have been wholly justified, then I could only curse and gnash my teeth like a stage villain foiled again. I was an hour late. I had come three hundred miles to be with her, but I was an hour late. I had thrown up my life in town and

returned to be with her, but I was an hour late. I was an hour late. If I had had my wits about me I should have slapped her face for that and left then and there, if I had not thought that words still meant something, if I had not been so tender for a love I had already lost that I was afraid to raise my voice to her, so utterly worn out and beat up that she could have taken out my letters and read them back to me in a parody voice and all I would have been able to do would be to sit there and cry. As it was, that was about the only abasement I managed to avoid.

She strode the room, remarking that she had been sitting waiting for ages and ages and wondering where I had got to. I nodded. Well, here I am, I said. But I knew it was no use, it was not me she wanted but an excuse to be nasty. I pointed out that she had apparently cleared the house of parents and siblings, though in fact the general assembly of the presbyterian church could have gathered there for all the use we were making of it. Silence. I tried a smile, laugh it off. She regarded me like a sunday school teacher faced with an indecent exposure. With a last effort before stalling my brain turned up the idea of contact, of body, all this wordy nonsense is the trouble. I opened my arms in the archetypal gesture. She stared at me. Come here, I groaned, at the thought of touching her woollen sweater. She shook

her head. I took a moment to think about that. Why not? I don't want to. Well, that seemed logical enough. Far be it from me to press my horrible slobbering self on anyone. We sat and stared at each other. The fire burned. That's a great fire you have there, I said in a friendly way. Silence. I looked at her. She nodded. It was a great fire. Yes, I said, trying to push this insanity into farce, she must laugh now and be human again, yes sir there's no denying that. She smiled thinly, at a bad joke. Which it was. Silence, oh long pause. You're not being very helpful, I said. She shrugged her spindly shoulders. I told her about how tired I felt, the journey, the sleeplessness, she had to understand and be gentle if I seemed stupid, I wasn't really with it. That's all right, she said. To plug up the aching silence I told her about my life in town, trying to spark off the letters lying in her memory, and about one sheer day I had spent walking over a lonely part of the downs, in those unnatural hollows where you are quite alone, doused in a vast silence. She started talking herself then, on this neutral level. She had been driving back from a party with some friend of hers, a poet she said, and they were going very fast, it seemed they would melt into the airstream, were being shaped by it as pebbles by the tide. I snatched at this and tried to say why my thing had been different. Yes, she interrupted, you were standing still and we were going fast, perhaps that's the

difference. Like everything she said that night, very clear and premeditated and tart. A punch in every line, and most of them low. Perhaps it was, I said with a feeble attempt at an ironical grin. She leered at me. Why did you ask me to come home, I said, if you were going to be like this? Do you just like having power over people? Said what, she bit out. In your last letter you said you loved me and wanted me to come home, remember? That was last week, she said. I should have laughed, but it did not seem very funny then. But look, for Christ's sake, if you say a thing people assume you mean it, they're stupid that way I know but all the same. Oh grow up, she said in a weary way, standing, people change, just because I said a thing last week I can't know what I'm going to be tomorrow. True. Well you should, I stuttered, I mean one's got to, somehow. One has, has one, she mimicked. Well I don't. Silence. Then you're no better than a sadist, I said, otherwise you couldn't behave like this to me when you know what I feel about you and when I'm all worn out and everything. Silence. A little vicious sadist. And it struck somewhere, for she almost shouted, shut up. Why the word worried her I don't know, and by then did not greatly care. I may be slow in these matters, and was not at my best that night, but even I can see the obvious if it is used to take my eyes out. No wonder she found my weakness infuriating, when she had purposely

screwed herself up to be as cutting as possible, to get the point across in the shortest and least painful way. And then to have to keep it up while elephantitis lumbers around sniffing the air.

She went to answer the telephone, and in her absence the room reverted to its usual dimensions and I was left in a large, quietly expensive lounge, being nibbled at by a smart little overgrown and underdeveloped girlie who was evidently bored with me, not even angry, just bored. There was no way I could reach her. She held all the cards, including the joker of surprise, and even using them as crudely as she did she had always the walls of silence within which to hide. I knew she was used to people being unpleasant to her and simply bricked herself up in that silence and shut them out. I was now, for whatever reason, on the outside of the barrier within which she cultivated the subtle growths of her imagination. No amount of noise or confusion would ever have reached her there, after a childhood spent hoarding and secreting. The only thing that did worry her, that could touch her in there where she kept herself from me that night, was the thought that she had presented her image badly. For this meant that They could not be securely blamed for being too stupid or selfish to understand her, it meant that she might be at fault and the pain she caused become her responsibility. And once after she had come out with

some particularly nasty gob and I could think of nothing to reply, the silence left her to her own voices, the only ones to which she ever listened. And she started to stutter and grab at words in an attempt to qualify, almost begging me to understand that she had not meant quite that, to bury it with more words. For she defended herself with dramatic presentations of herself, and as long as these accurately traced the person she had decided to be then other people could go to hell, for with their whining and shouting they only proved themselves silly and weak, unworthy of her. If they could not understand her image they were stupid, if they could not accept it they were feeble. She never blurred the edges of this premeditated personality except in error, and went to bed promising herself to be clearer and even less ambiguous on the morrow. In love she presented herself as a girl in love, when she ceased to love she did it utterly, throwing away that version of herself like an old dress. She did not change as others do, a new figure on the old ground, she was converted and saw the light and was born again. Only in her letters could she afford to breathe freely, only in that more perfect medium where what we say goes and there is nothing to give us away could she allow herself to live to the full extent.

I figured all this out in the following few days, having left her house that evening too battered to under-

stand and too tired to care. I was sick of her, made sick by this abrupt conversion of the most sensitive person I knew into the coldest and most banal. I am not confusing what she did with how she did it, nor do I think that ceasing to love me is a mark of banality. But when a fine and lively person chooses to live by invented rules it is not just me that suffers but everything and everybody. And although I had some bad days when I remembered the girl who had given me so much of herself, and wondered what I had done wrong, the manner of her telling me she did not want me any longer made it easier for me to feel the same about her, and by the time she finally showed up again a week later, prompted by God knows what stirrings of duty or curiosity, I found to my surprise that my emotions had healed again and the strongest feeling I had for this awkward and embarrassed child was for the injury she was doing herself and the life I had glimpsed within her. Certainly I would have liked her to realize just what she had done to me, but there was nothing I could do to reach her. I could not make her suffer as I had, that will be for someone else. But somewhere the trap is waiting just the same, for luckily there is quite enough pain in the world to give everyone a fair share. So perhaps there is justice of a sort, if only because the injustice is complete.

For a few months I tried to make sense of my life

now that the sense had again been removed. But it did not work, and one evening I wandered back to the boat, back to this empty town. It is winter now, and the nine months between have given life to nothing but these pages. There would be no point in recalling that time, for I have done as little as I did when you let me down, and without even the ascetic shimmer of those parched weeks. I muddle along in a quieter way now, my coat of arms a fat man in a bath of water no longer really warm, meaning in a vague way to get out and dry himself, knowing how much more pleasant it would be to be dressed and dry, but lying there all the same in the grey tepid water and the white bath fringed with a strip of scum. The pajamas I took off for you have long since split at the crotch, but I go every night to the same cold bed and the absence from my side, the abscess in my side, is you. At a party somewhere, I forget, I met a girl who took me home and, road, street, house, floor, it was the room I shared with you that first spring, before either of us was born. It was like stepping back into a photograph, for rooms do not change, it is we who are fickle and find their constancy an embarrassment, like a lover one no longer wants. But though I go there and work odd evenings, and she comes to make my bed at weekends, it is not that I lack. Something much deeper must go before I can even see her and know whether or not I like her. At present she is only an unpaid companion, I can't even say off hand what

colour her eyes are.

If you try and look at a faint distant light in the darkness it disappears altogether, sucked out by your too intense concentration. It will appear only to the eye that is content not to see it clearly, to sense it rather than study it. And this is what I want to do with you, not to describe you or explicate the motives of our life as though it was a clever play, but simply to affirm the sense I have of you.

Once upon a time it was easier. Then I would simply have considered as many aspects of the matter as I could, and then chosen one of them as the true explanation, as if that effected some delineation in life. For example, it occurred to me afterwards that this was the first time in your life that you had been left rather than doing the leaving, and I wondered to what extent that had contributed to your terrible shellshocked calm during those weeks. Was the difficulty not so much an unbroken belief in my affection as a refusal of your self-esteem to accept that I could reject you? And of course there is much to support this view. There always is. One of my thoughts at the time was of the way you had always sneered gently at my attempts to get off with other women. Which were admittedly pretty feeble, for I was an amateur in the routines I have since had to learn the hard way, but to my small and easily hurt ears it

often sounded as though you were daring me to succeed in attracting anyone else, as though you were doing me a favour in liking me. That was not true of course, I know, I think I know you never meant any such thing, as your beautiful and utterly tender words of pride and happiness in me so often showed me, not really believing the good I heard. But one of the ideas which hardened me when we came to it at last was this, that you did not really believe I would have the guts to go through with it, that I was too lazy and timid to finally dismiss you. And it was this that kept me from any possibility of returning to you, the break made. So perhaps this is after all a fuss about nothing. Just the cold squabble of two people matching their pride alone and it alone hurt. Perhaps this is why you lost interest in me as soon as I confessed that I had loved you all along, why you replied smugly that you had never really believed otherwise, because it was intolerable that anyone should look at you and then turn to someone else. Is that it? But the light has disappeared, this is not you and I that I am talking about but two people who acted as we acted. The more I think about it the more it all means and the less it all matters. It is a mystery the deeper for offering too many solutions. But as soon as I turn in disgust from my reasoning there it is again, and all I can do is present it in the form it has assumed in my life, rightly

or wrongly.

To understand everything is not to pardon everything but to condemn oneself and suffer, and know that this will not make the slightest difference next time. We do not act in sketch, as we think, but in situation, and situations come one by one and are never repeated. If we truly learnt from our mistakes then they could no longer rub us as they do, our remorse would be spent towards a better self, beyond ourselves. But as we do not we can only reflect and weep in silence, in transience and isolation. The most our experience will do for us is make us more cautious, limit our ambition by revealing the extent of possible unhappiness. If ever again, after living for some time with a girl and then being attracted to someone else, I thought to leave her, nothing of all I have thought and felt in this affair could ever help me out, for how could I be sure it applied to that new scene? It would still be me who would have to decide what was relevant and what not, and no potted lessons preserved from the past could help me there. In fact I would think more than twice about leaving her, but only because I know now the risks involved, and quite likely I should say, ah yes, but in this case, with this girl, nothing can go wrong. Textbook ethics are only of use to people with textbook minds, who worry out the implications of not paying the bus conductor.

Nor can I spruce this up into an envoi by concluding that I have at least learnt never again to treat anyone as I treated you. Certainly I will never treat anyone like that, for the simple reason that I will never meet anyone, never fall in love with anyone. I shall meet and fall in love with particular people in particular places, and I know damn fine that if one of them becomes an object in the way I see then I shall walk all over her, and suffer for it afterwards, and still be exactly where I am now and always will be. Like it or not we cannot see others as whole people all the time. The prime minister or shop assistant exists less than the person we love, but when our love tires that person no longer exists at all, except as a pain in the neck. There is no theory to be got from this, for in theory all crimes reduce to this one selection and choice, and the man who cares for his old mother more than all the world is one with the soldier who got fourteen of them with one burst, you who are gentle to your wife while she is floppy and pregnant are the echo and shadow of the mercenary who ties up the native girl to a tree by her ankles and brings down the machete between her legs.

I cannot qualify what I did, seeing it as a moment in progression. It is an isolated and particular business and that, far from diminishing it, only makes it absolute. Because I cannot undertake to do differently in the

future does not mean I judge myself any the easier now, only that I despair of my ability to be other than I will be. And if there is any one crime which should be punished, then in my world it is the cold denial of affection to someone who has come to expect it, the sudden reversal which leads to a soft and trembling love being treated as an object. When in my anger and pain I called her a sadist I was speaking a truth from my own reprisals against myself. Not that I believe any cruelty can compare with that to the body, for while we must all face the pain of growing and living in a world not made for us the infliction of agony is a hideous cheat, exploiting an irrelevant infirmity we can do nothing about. We may talk and worry our way out of depression but a nail driven through the palm is there to stay, and so is the antic hooligan death it drags us to meet, uninvited.

And yet, in those last clear months I spent alone after your letters I had a dream of a bloodied girl lying on a table, and thinking of that I remembered from where it had come. One of the things they did in the concentration camps was to remove the inner sexual organs of girls, without drugs, which were in short supply. And so, during those months, it had become clear to some part of me that what I did to you was in one sense a much worse thing than that. In one sense only, but one which is so much part of me where sheer torturing is not that it means more.

We lived together for two years, we were very close in a number of ways and not so close in others. One of the things we shared was a queer sense of humour and an affection for the small things of life, the leap of coffee grounds when the seal is broken, the purity of a wavetop a moment after the curl folds over, what it is that cats and buses have in common. Our division of people into yogis and cruds, pandas and pseuds, the first being all those who, like ourselves, seemed in danger of becoming extinct. In both of us these were the intimate signs of a spirit we did not dare admit to the cruds of the world for fear of their steady gaze. It was a playful expression of our fascination in the source of singing and joy, which is not to be found by drawing pictures in the heavens but by drawing distinctions in the world, how you looked smooth and tight as you came out of your bath and into our bed, the way your nipples changed their texture as the perfect touchstones of desire.

This we shared, this we created in each other by loosing it in ourselves. For such vibrations are officially discouraged, we have all been taught mediocrity by example since our infant bedrooms with their wallpaper tidy without being symmetrical, colourful but not too exciting. A world comfortable but uninteresting leaving our minds free to concentrate on what we are going to do to it, head down and get that ball back. Both of us

had somehow preserved through this another scale of values altogether, in which two and two are still two, in which an earthquake or a marriage are monumentally less important than a spinning smoke ring or a door that miaows when you open it. But these are not things you can talk about, not in front of the blind querying gaze. They are like quick jokes, staled in retelling. And so we kept quiet until, finding the same quirky misalignment of sight in each other, we gradually allowed it to seep into everything we did, until that became unique too.

You were always less securely at home in this world than I, both in the curse of your family and in that wish for a creamy life, rich and thick, which used to take you now and then. I know I used to horribly mock this wish, love, but in a weird way your body had already done so. For who was it, when we did eventually go out to the cinema or the restaurant, who got tired and felt sick and had a headache? Which is why your dreams always seemed to me an unreal attempt to deny the mind you had, to be a bourgeois as one tries to be a character in a novel or a film. You were too far gone in undermining life with mind to ever wholly believe in your chosen persona, quite apart from the fact that I hold creativity and wit to be good in themselves and any search for a mask the gratuitous assumption of a rigor mortis we will all have to face soon enough anyway.

Why I spend so much mind on this, it is the hinge

of all to follow. If I could ever believe and see you black on white as a vulgar and ordinary person who simply aped the manners of the man you were with, if that made any sense then I could forget all this, for it would be no more than a whip I have made to hurt myself. But if that is true then my life with you was a hollow joke, and it never seemed like a hollow joke. If I am wrong about this then I am wrong about everything, and I have to assume that I am not, even if it entails irredeemable loss and destruction.

People take on the aura of the person they love, and more, discover in themselves that with which the other is in unison and which vibrates without any motion of the self. It was thus that I awoke in you whole dimensions you had forgotten about, and which you kept denying, knowing too well the dangers of admitting a softness and perception which puts one at the mercy of the world and of others. In any love affair it is the same, for every retreat from indifference is potentially a weapon placed in strange hands, and is not the atmosphere of love charged with their continuing not to abuse this advantage? For us it was, and even more with our astonished realization that there was someone who did not expect us to apologise for what we were, to add to the festering heap of giblets we all hack away from ourselves to make the silky statue we have in mind. But the marble will keep

on spelling itself flesh with sores and growths which can only heighten the pile and the stink of it poisoning us, not with the serenity of death we sought but with its decay. We found ourselves with a chance to escape all that and accept the humanity we were too aware of ever to ignore, a chance to help each other admit themselves fully, which is all anyone has a right to want. And that chance I spoiled, not only in this one affair, but, and this is the twist in my sickness, for ever. Certainly our love was folding up in any case, but the expanded view of ourselves we had won from our trust in each other was not in question and need never have been touched. If I had only been able to treat you at the end with the same sympathy that had informed our loving all along, the break might have been made and sealed with the juices all intact. We could now be thinking of each other, occasionally, at odd moments, as a warm glow stowed away in the past, an indelible assertion of what was good in our love, and there was so much.

But it was not like that. When I left you I did so not as the person who had loved you but as a stranger hideously resembling your lover, your me. It was myself not me who left you, who hurt you, who played with you, who let you cry alone and was bored, who forced you to understand what no one should have to understand, that no one is to be trusted, that good and evil are but two

expressions on the same face. I presented you with this incomprehensible fact in the crudest way, and in doing that I did something worse than the black uniformed guard who burns flesh and tears nerves. For he is simply the image of evil, he is evil pure and straight and in his very existence affirms the possibility of love and tenderness. But I was that love and I was tender and I was the instrument of your pain, and in that I made it impossible ever to believe in love or tenderness again, took the meaning from such words by turning them out and showing them woven from the one piece of human cloth. What I have fouled is not only a creation but the very possibility of creation in that quiet and intimate vein of loving which has its value in being open and without fear. We must be able to trust the grass not to give way and the branches of trees not to strangle if we are ever to leave the house, ever to overcome the voices that warn and whisper moderation and restraint.

Perhaps I am in fact wrong about the consequences. Perhaps you have somehow kept your softness and fertility intact, writing me off as a man who smiled and smiled and was a villain. Or perhaps the ragged and gaping rent I left in your intimate tissue has been healed by the love of a man as sensitive to it as I was, and whose image is too bright in your mind to give the shadow room. Yet even supposing all this were so, even supposing the cheap

prattle of your last letters was only an index of your disinterest in me and not a sign that the voices had taken over, even supposing all this were true, and I do not believe it for a moment, even then my crime against myself would remain, the image of you sitting in that warm sunny airless games room crying into my separate and empty silence would remain and will remain for ever, and nothing can make that better. We see ourselves living in a disposable present, roughing out our future, forget that we are also laying down the past with which, when that future blurs and the present goes slack, as it will one day for all of us, we are going to have to live. Everything is being taken down and will be used in evidence.

And that is all. Nevertheless I can see that I am going to spin this out a bit yet, just to make absolutely sure there is no mistake, to give everyone plenty of time to change their minds. What I really hate about this kind of depression is not so much the pain or the dullness as the banality of it, it is so predictable. Everyone is happy in his own special way, feeling space in which to move and spread, to be most of himself. But depression is a lowering of the limit that brings everyone back to a common mean of humanity, an identikit face defined by what it lacks, colour, movement, intention. In any case, it is not just a word we can write and leave and close the book. The most perfect and moving accounts of the

blues fail in that they nevertheless make them seem as tangible and absolute as a cloudy day, a small amount of man totally enclosed by gloom. And though we think how terrible it must be to have gone through that, in fact we rather envy them, these professional sufferers. They have in their way the quiet confidence of the skilled cabinet maker or navigator, one senses their satisfaction in having rejected the petty illusions which other people clutch at. No half measures for them, when they suffer they really suffer, all the way. And it's impossible to help admiring them, as it is anyone secure in his role. But while it may be magnificent, it is not depressing, not what I call depressing. Perhaps this is a fault of my fickle nature, perhaps of their too stolid one. For me despair is what one cannot live within, since it is precisely the refusal of despair to be properly final that I find so depressing. If I could count on anything, even on feeling bad, then I could work out some game of life by those rules. But the moment my mood is known it is no longer mine, it falls like the cartoon character who walks off the cliff edge and is quite all right until he realizes that what he is doing is impossible. And the second I realize I am depressed that is an end of my warm immersion in despair, it contracts to a hard lump in the corner of the room, where I stare at it. However loud I shout, God I'm depressed and how I suffer, it sounds rather hollow. I cannot at one and the

same time be depressed and stand aside from myself to recognize the fact and arrange my life around it.

So really it makes no sense to end the story with a tight seal of sadness, though I don't see what else I can do. The very point is that my depression now is not a definition but a continuing suspense. At any moment I might meet a girl who would put you out of my mind for the rest of my life. But at this moment I have not. That is what it means. That and the appalling weight of each day that passes without any sign of life. For often, sometimes anyway, the experience of the day added up to more than the sum of its parts, something was created fresh and unforeseeable in the happening. But there comes a time when the event always falls below your expectations, or as these numb and expect less, turns out in each case exactly equivalent. And, a gambler with the dice running against him, what you know is chance and limitless possibility you know too is determined and foregone conclusion, you come to know because you cannot go on being disappointed. And even with other people, where there seems no excuse of bad luck, where it is all your own work, when time after time you are not rejected, not accepted, when there is no anger, no fear, contempt or amusement, no interest. They simply do not want to know you are there. And that is a fact the mind is too small for and which you have to face and which it is impossible to face, that you are alone. And of course you know you are alone,

everybody is alone, it's your favourite cliché, but however you say the words they do not contain the experience as words should. It remains just a line, but a dull line, a dead truth, even if it were possible to face it there would be no point, there is nothing to be got in facing it, and how can you face it when you know that people have loved you before and may love you again, when it is only now that nothing happens, only now, this useless intangible inescapable now. So you scream all right all right let me bear it in mind and go on living, I take the point, there's no need to rub my face in it. I know now what it means to be alone and promise never to play fast and loose with my affections again. But of course there is no one there, your voice simply makes the air vibrate a little and for a moment, in the echoes of that vibration, you almost catch a glimpse of the vicious circle in which you are going to have to live.

Desperate for mirrors I invent sensibility in people who have none, and then suffer the sickness after for not having treated them with the contempt they deserve. My love, oh how I miss you, miss you love. Just one person, that's all, and no people. If only I could believe in the hopelessness long enough to see what I must do. I want to go away from all this, but be able to come back. Only I don't want to have to take any more now. I want to hibernate.

A few weeks ago, in a junk shop all shifty furniture

and books no eye will ever read, I bought a novel for a shilling and on the flyleaf written in pencil so hard it had marked the title page, I found the following. John B. from Catherine, Paris, Summer 1958. The first real poem I have read for a long time, and a perfect measure of this feeling. But I too cannot press gently enough, put like this it hams, nostalgia, sentimentality, oh filth. I know, but you are still there, my vulgarity cannot hurt you now. You and Catherine and no nonsense John, clearing out his unwanted books to make room for a new sideboard. So light you are, so unassertive, touching me only as on a summer afternoon we may be struck by the shadow of a bird flying between us and the sun. And when I think of the brisk mood I set out in I have to giggle. I, who was going to write my way out of every difficulty. Only face up to your problems my boy, and the battle is half won. Once upon a time there was a man out walking in the jungle when he met a lion coming in the opposite direction. Remember the old adage he did not run but faced up to it squarely and waited for it to go away. Which it did, having eaten him.

And so, left with a girl I despise, this love of the past to which every attempt to leave it is witness, and cannot really believe in a present, all this health nonsense. It is impossible and I have failed and must go on failing until the day, not long please, when the senses stir again, when another girl is born, when you

call me and I kiss her.

Certes je ne veux point m'excuser, je me condamne plus sévèrement qu'un autre peut-être ne le ferait à ma place; mais je puis au moins me rendre ici ce solennel témoignage, que je n'ai jamais agi par calcul, et que j'ai toujours été dirigé par des sentiments vrais et naturels. Comment se fait-il qu'avec ces sentiments je n'aie fait si longtemps que mon malheur et celui des autres?

But perhaps after all something will happen. Perhaps I'll be knocked down crossing the Place d'Italie. The possibilities are endless and I can only imagine some version of what I know. Perhaps, perhaps all this is only a prelude to a leap from whose farther shore, ah fuck.

If only I had not been born with a talent for happiness. The real rot is in having to mope with all my good gifts wasted. I'll never be able to despair beautifully, with lillies blooming from my arse.

Why do all these endings sound false, half closed? Why can't I make an end, for Christ's sake?

This may remind you of someone you used to know, and I don't mean me. That is if you should ever read it. I certainly shan't put it in your way, which would be a gesture of the kind I have always loathed. No, better you should happen on it, pick it up at the station and miss a

breath, perhaps even a train. Or better still if your husband or lover were to buy it for your birthday and wrap it up in the richest paper. Yes, I should like that.

And here let me draw a line to my sickness, let me draw a line. All right go on. I wanted to spit it all out, to spew it up on paper. But all I got was the retching of an empty stomach big with gas. This finely written boke. Sic. Come on lovie, push harder for mummy, big push. Plop.

It was a death of the heart, the long goodbye. I will not allow my heart to be used as a football. What good would sight and hearing do to a creature that cannot move itself to or from the objects wherein at a distance it perceives good or evil? And would not quickness of sensation be an inconvenience to an animal that must lie still wherever chance has once placed it, and there receive the afflux of colder or warmer, clean or foul, water, as it happens to come to it?

Today is sunny, still and bright. I walked back to the house alone, my keys jingling a song of sixpence down the only street left in this sunday world. And now at my window the sun lies on the working sea, on the table, on the black veined sheet of paper. The page on a sunny day is as the page should be, a space too bold for the eye to enter. The words taken remain on the stunned retina and only slowly dissolve, their taste remains.

It is this foretaste of old age I fear, the sadness clinging to all my thoughts and at times overwhelming them. I tried to escape by leaving town, but the sickness travelled too. You cannot escape from yourself. And this is what frightens me most of all, I mean the setting of my thoughts about you into cliché. For while there is originality there is still hope, but when the mind can only shuffle a pack of memories and mutter truisms then you are finished. I have not enough imagination to recover the past as present, so it slips in undercover of the nearest handmedown idea, and all hope of reaching a truth, a living, is gone.

Wait though, there is something I have forgotten, someone. I heard recently that she was pregnant, perhaps by her fast poet, speeding along velvet roads to the black and clanging sea, driving a wedge into the balk of the evening air, into her small and shabby loins, to spring her a sticky trap. It would be easy to laugh, but all I feel is a terrible weight in my lungs. I suppose I had come to see her as the mythical personage she believed herself to be, to whom nothing in a human way could happen. And then to fall for the dreariest banality of all, all that high endeavour turned to a dirty story. And this makes me sad, for I should have liked her to have made it, even though she stepped on my face in reaching, or perhaps because of it. Since both of us had to suffer the tearing of her attempt at a better, only to have it

all come tumbling down to a level we could perhaps have had a shot at ourselves, in the first place.

Anyway since she has turned up, just what did my love for her have to do with all this? Where does it fit in? It was never a threat to my life with you, for the two touched only within the theoretical unity of my mind. Nor were you the starch and she the seasoning. Rather you were a complete love of mine, and she a mysterious and bewitching element of love. I could never have lived with her as I did with you, or rather if I had it would have borne no relation to the actual experience she gave me, it would have been another matter. My love for her was a love withheld, a straining towards the future which, on arrival, dispersed the tension that made it live. On the face of it we broke up the first time because of nervousness and the second because she had fallen for someone else, but really we never tried to make it work, accepted these decisions without question, because without knowing we knew it had to be so. It was a love dead on arrival, to be confounded by any the most brilliant outcome. Her attraction was intolerable precisely because I could never have her, never be with her, and when, inevitably, I tried, I found only common flesh and small talk, the apparatus of love but no love there.

She had a face of brittle beauty that spent most of its time being ugly, a face I have known all my life

and will no doubt pursue down the corridors of other features for the rest of it. But except when the current of creation, of willing a future into existence by intense living now, except when that made her invisible she was only what she seemed, a rather ordinary weedy schoolgirl. We docked in silence like huge magnets, as if realizing that in reality we were both very limited people and did not want this commonplace intruding upon the sense of infinite possibility whose source we seemed to find in each other, not as another person but as a funnel to the future. Oh it's easy to laugh now, but why deride a limitation of vision that only mistook its goal? Since we must be sceptical of ourselves, let us suspect those thoughts that are easy or tend to ease, not those that are perhaps too big for their boots but are nevertheless constantly in search of an adequate expression in word and deed, an expression not too complex for us to conceive but too simple, so that every attempt is parody, an overstatement full of extraneous nonsense. What if I fleshed out my dreams in the figure of an impressionable dolly, affected and fickle, who seemed at that moment to hold the world in her fragile head? What if she played her solemn games with me as one piece among many? It is the dance and not the dancer that is beautiful. Though we were ridiculous we stumbled upon something that was not, a form of life that had form and which we lived as

if it had already happened and been sifted in our imaginations, with all the beauty of recollected time and none of the sterility and deadness that are its price. I am telling you that we lived, for a brief time, a life that was not life but memory, and yet not memory but life, that we dissolved the impossible barrier between the two, life with its unformed depth and memory with its linear perspective, and lived in the light and view of both, where each moment was already past as we lived it and we the living artists of our own reality.

It was all a certain combination of favours of course, the long absences, the wealth of letters, the brief and defined periods together. But, as a flight of birds can describe the shape of the wind, as the finest music indicates the outlines of silence, so the pattern of our acts banal in themselves defined in the doing, before our startled eyes, the shape of a life. All a certain combination of favours, the same perhaps as awakened me very early the morning I was to return home to that brutal awakening, and showed me before it vanished the meaning of this piece. I was hot and restless and went out for a walk in the cold air just before dawn. The sun was already diluting the darkness behind, but on the chalk track that led up the face of the downs it was dark but for the diffused moonlight. The air was still and chilly and the ground white with frost. I climbed

slowly, my shoes breaking flakes of mud from the ruts. All around the swollen downs curved away, smooth as bruised flesh. Behind me the sky was light blue with the coming sun, but above the stars still struck out bright in a deep indigo. I left the track and climbed straight up the grassy face of the ridge, out of breath, spewing vapour into the iced air. And reaching suddenly the crest I saw huge in the sky the moon, pale and etched with detail, and turning, the sun rising vast and messy out of the morning mist, painfully, as if this day were the first and would always be. And I stood there in the freezing stillness, holding a branch of the single thorn tree growing on that ridge as a frame for the wind, and the sun and the moon stood in my sky together and in their light I stood and wept, too weak an earth for this alternate charge.

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